CREATURES OF MYTH AND IMAGINATION

EUROPE AND THE AMERICAS

The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin Spring 2026

CREATURES OF MYTH AND IMAGINATION

EUROPE AND THE AMERICAS

Julia Perratore
Laura Filloy Nadal
Joanne Pillsbury

THE MET

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

The Met collection provides unparalleled opportunities to explore the world's artistic heritage. In *Creatures of Myth and Imagination: Europe and the Americas*, curators from The Met Cloisters and The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing have joined together to consider the universe of hybrid creatures formed by artists from cultures on both sides of the Atlantic who fused familiar features of humans, animals, vegetables, and even minerals into new beings, transforming the natural into the supernatural.

Fantastical hybrid creatures have been with us as long as artmaking and storytelling have existed. Figures that combine human and animal characteristics are found in cave paintings created over 50,000 years ago on the island of Sulawesi, Indonesia. The Great Sphinx of Giza, with its lion body and human head, was built about 2,500 BCE for the Egyptian pharaoh Khafre. Deeply unsettling beings—created by merging animals, humans, and inanimate objects—cavort in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch and many of his contemporaries and followers. Hybrid creatures abound in the work of the Surrealists and continue to spring from the imaginations of artists, filmmakers, and writers. Indeed, from the Pan of Classical mythology to *Pan's Labyrinth*, Guillermo del Toro's 2006 film, hybrid creatures are subjects of enduring fascination.

Creatures of Myth and Imagination examines the central place of these beings in storytelling and art in two parts of the world that had no direct contact prior to the fifteenth century: the ancient Americas—Latin America before 1600, home to a range of Indigenous traditions—and western medieval Europe. By juxtaposing separate but parallel traditions of creature-making, this project encourages us to reconsider the universal challenges faced by sculptors, metalsmiths, and weavers when giving form to mythical beings. It also allows us to appreciate the fact that their imaginative interpretations have given us some of the most terrifying, and beloved, works of art ever made.

I thank Julia Perratore, Associate Curator at The Met Cloisters, Laura Filloy Nadal, Curator in The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, and Joanne Pillsbury, Andrall E. Pearson Curator, Arts of the Ancient Americas, The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, for their work on this *Bulletin* and the exhibition mounted at The Met Cloisters. Additional thanks are owed to C. Griffith Mann, Michel David-Weill Curator in Charge of the Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters, and Alisa LaGamma, Ceil and Michael E. Pulitzer Curator in Charge of The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing.

We are deeply indebted to our colleagues at the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico, including Joel Omar Vázquez Herrera, Director General, Juan Manuel Garibay López, National Coordinator of Museums and Exhibitions, Itzia Villicaña Gerónimo, Deputy Director of International Exhibitions, Miguel Ángel Trinidad, Director of Exhibitions, and Patricia Ledesma Bouchan, Director of the Museo del Templo Mayor, for generously lending some truly magnificent hybrid creatures.

The presentation of these fantastic beings is thanks to the generosity of the Michel David-Weill Fund and the David L. Klein, Jr. Foundation. The Met's quarterly *Bulletin* program is supported, in part, by the Lila Acheson Wallace Fund for The Metropolitan Museum of Art, established by the cofounder of *Reader's Digest*.

Laying bare the extraordinary scope of human ingenuity, *Creatures of Myth and Imagination* reintroduces us to uncanny beings that have perplexed, amused, frightened, and enchanted over the course of history, prompting us to consider our place within the vast web of nature.

MAX HOLLEIN

Marina Kellen French Director and CEO
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

A small plaque of ivory carved by an Italian artist in the late eleventh century depicts one episode in the earth's Judeo-Christian origin story: the creation of the animals (fig. 1). This plaque was one of a series that together told the history of human salvation from the creation of the world to its end. At left, God the Father, portrayed as a haloed, bearded man in a long robe, reaches out to bless the beasts he has just called into being. Filling most of the scene, the animals, in turn, direct their attention to God. The stacking and overlapping of their bodies indicate spatial depth and suggest a greater multitude than actually fits on the diminutive plaque's surface; they are a representative sample standing in for all the creatures of the earth. Many of the beasts are easily identifiable, including a lion, a snake, an ox, a horse, a ram, a stag, and a rabbit. Equally familiar, but far less mundane, are the griffin (part lion, part eagle) and the basilisk (part rooster, part snake) pictured in the lower right corner. The plaque makes it clear that God created *all* animals, including those that no one in late eleventh-century Italy

1. Plaque with God creating the animals, 1084. Amalfi, Southern Italy. Elephant ivory, H. 4 3/16 in. (10.7 cm). Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.156)

(or anyone else, for that matter) had ever seen, but in whose existence they believed.[1] Yet the bodies of a griffin and a basilisk, combining parts of both beast and fowl, run counter to the biblical narrative's separation of birds (day five of Creation) and animals (day six).

A pendant carved several centuries later by a Mexica (Aztec) artist may also depict an act of creation—in this instance, the making of a human being (fig. 2). The pendant is made from the cross section of a conch shell, and the central perforation allows it to be suspended. Incised on the surface is the creator, the feathered serpent known as Quetzalcoatl in Nahuatl. Its body is coiled around the central void, while its head, seen in dorsal view with one eye drilled on either side of its feathered snout, extends into the empty space. Two human hands emerge from the sides of the beast's body. One holds what may be a flower, while the other grasps what could be a knife. Below, the lower part of a human torso and two flexed legs dangle from behind the feathered serpent's body. Quetzalcoatl is not only the deity who extracted maize—the hallmark of Mesoamerican sustenance—from the bowels of the earth. He is also the god who brought material out of the underworld to perpetually create individual humans. A quintessential symbol of fertility, Quetzalcoatl is one of numerous Mesoamerican deities with animal names or forms. He represents the fusion of the body of a snake—an earthly element—and the long, iridescent green feathers of the quetzal, whose nature is primarily celestial. This duality grants him the ability to move between different levels of the cosmos and to recirculate divine substances from the world of the gods to the realm of humankind.

The artists who made these two objects lived at different times and on opposite sides of a vast ocean. They each belonged to a society that was completely unaware of the other's existence. The stories that they aimed to tell stemmed from traditions that carried on in parallel for centuries, only converging when Europeans crossed the Atlantic in the late fifteenth century. In many ways, the objects they produced, together with the stories they told, could not differ more. Yet both carvings reveal their makers' shared desire to understand the origins of the world, and both propose that these origins resulted from the deliberate actions of powerful beings. In depicting primordial acts, both objects also speak eloquently of the human impulse to create, manifested here in the depiction of beings that do not exist in nature: Quetzalcoatl, the griffin, the basilisk. The Mexica pendant conveys the belief that the all-powerful creator of humankind took the form of a being composed of parts only ever seen on different animals. The Italian plaque depicts the deity in human form but affirms that he created all creatures, seen and unseen. Able to both prowl the earth and take

2. Feathered serpent pendant, 1325–1521. Mexica (Aztec), Central Mexico. Shell, W. 1⅞ in. (4.8 cm). Gift of the MoI Collection, 2020 (2020.386.1)

to the sky, these hybrid beings transcend the categories of natural phenomena that modern people have taken such pains to delineate. Fashioned from the stuff of nature, they are supernatural, endowed with powers beyond the visible and the knowable.

Around the globe, imaginary and supernatural beings take the forms of animals, plants, humans, and occasionally even minerals; the act of composing hybrid creatures whose appearances draw from these realms of nature is a near-universal human impulse. Seemingly limitless, the catalogue of hybrid creatures—sums of animals, plants, and minerals—cannot be studied from the perspectives of zoology, botany, mineralogy, or ecology. To understand them, it is necessary to delve into the complex cultural frameworks from which they emerge, which reveal their makers' perspectives on the confluence of the natural world, the supernatural, and the divine. Paradoxically, hybrids are beings born of the imagination, yet they often are considered real. Above all, to their makers they are necessary.[2]

But why compare this subject among traditions that, at first glance, appear both wildly different and completely unrelated? This *Bulletin* and the related exhibition at The Met Cloisters arose from conversations about the sheer number of thematic parallels observable in the visual arts made on either side of the Atlantic, long before any direct contact was made

between them. The fact that these were the first "worlds" to encounter each other once travel between eastern and western hemispheres became more common added a compelling dimension of complexity to these conversations. The prominence of hybrid creatures in both places, while not surprising in and of itself given their worldwide presence, emerged as an ideal topic for a collaborative project that is itself hybrid, bringing together specialists of the arts of the ancient Americas and medieval Europe. Relevant objects from these places represented in The Met collection determined the exhibition's date range of 500–1500 CE, while the millennium-long duration of this range confirms the enduring appeal of the hybrid creature among the cultures discussed. The exhibition is not meant to be comprehensive, and The Met collection's eclectic nature—in this, it is no different from any other museum—determined the materials and forms considered but also accounts for any perceived gaps or inconsistencies among the types of objects included.

Hybrid creatures present extraordinary characteristics that, when combined, convey power, charisma, and the ability to transform and be transformed. Above all, they expand the spheres of action of their worldly counterparts. In the hands of artists, hybrid creatures take on physical form and participate in many facets of human experience. The varied materials of artistic expression are mobilized to create the uncreated. Carved from stone and wood, shaped in clay and metal, and painted with colors, hybrid creatures inhabit the universe of architectural reliefs, mural paintings, sculptures in the round, ritual implements, containers, ornaments, and textiles. Given form, creature-objects adorn bodies, take part in sacred rites, enliven the activities of daily life, and even follow the dead to their graves.

Creatures of Myth and Imagination explores how objects decorated with or made in the shape of hybrid beings took material form and participated in the lives of premodern people. It examines the circumstances of their creation and use, capturing them "in action" as functional items often weighted with complex symbolic meaning. In particular, it highlights the ability of hybrid creatures to shape identities for both individuals and communities.

Hybrid beings provide artists with exceptional opportunities for formal invention. The Latin verb *creare* is the root of the English words "creature," "create"—as in the act of bringing something into being that never was there before—and "creative," describing something inventive, original, or imaginative. Hybrid beings are inherently created and creative, reflecting a deep-seated, paradoxical human desire to both order and disorder the world, attempting its classification while simultaneously reconfiguring the components of this classification to take them out of their familiar categories. Above all, they reveal the imaginative capabilities of storytellers and artists all over the world.

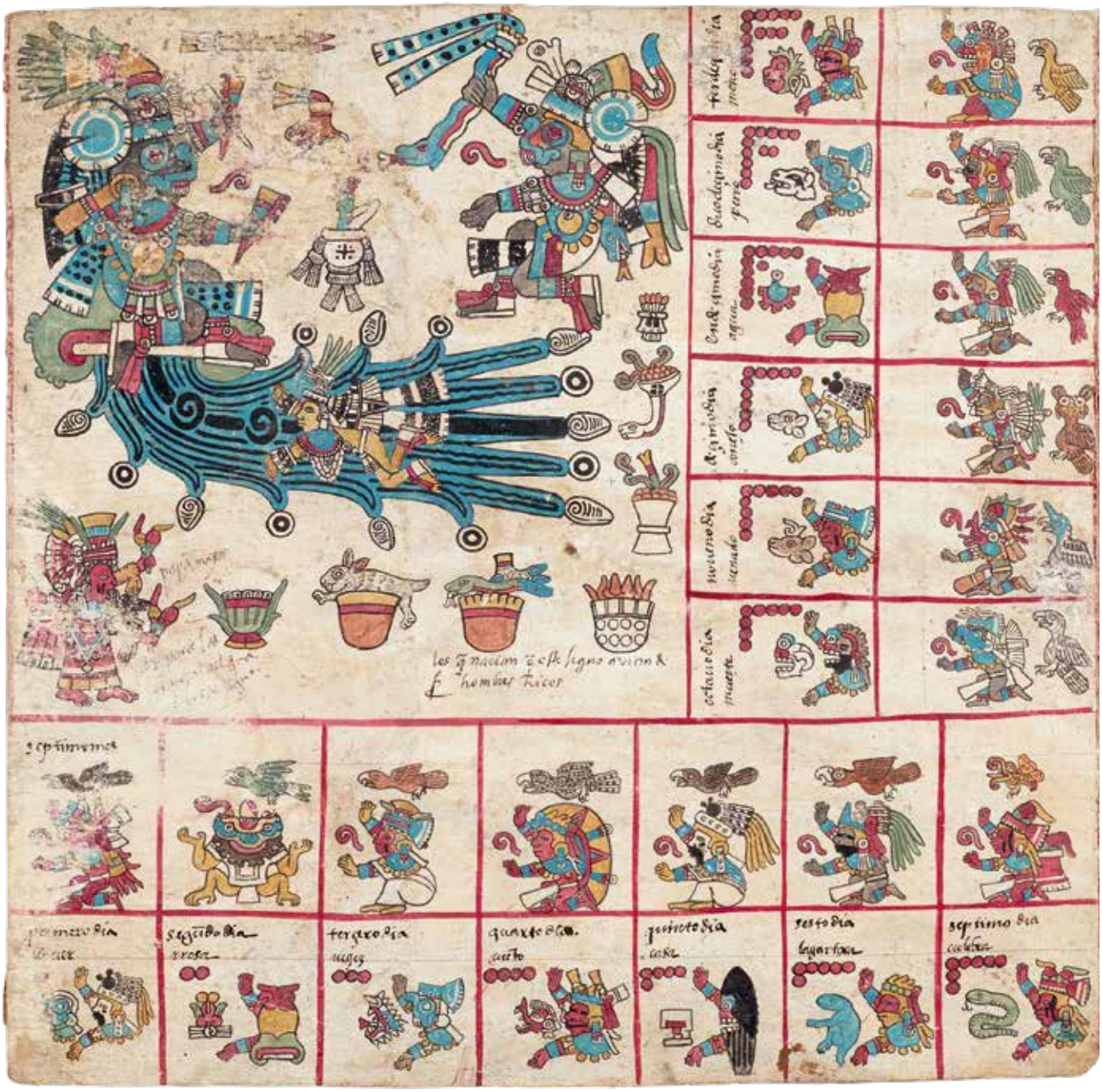
Deciphering Hybrids in the Americas and Europe

A multiplicity of composite beings that could traverse the earthly realm and the realm of the gods were present in ancient American culture. These beings were formed from elements of real animals: predators of the earth, air, and water; poisonous beings that lived underground or crawled upon it; creatures that populated swamps, lagoons, or seas and the water's edge; birds of all kinds, some with iridescent plumage and some capable of flying, floating, and diving; plants that sustained humans; and even rocks that were understood to be precursors of fire. The sources that tell us about these creatures are varied, ranging from oral accounts to written texts.

In Mesoamerica—a cultural region extending from Central Mexico to the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica, encompassing communities with certain shared traditions—these creatures are found in the manuscripts and monuments created before the Spanish invasion of the Americas in the sixteenth century and in the accounts of Mesoamerican practices and beliefs recorded in the early years of Spanish colonial rule.

The Maya, for example, developed a complex logophonetic writing system through which scholars can glean insights into dynastic histories and cosmological beliefs. Other writing systems flourished in ancient Mesoamerica, including in the Oaxacan and Central Mexican regions. One Mexica manuscript, known as the Codex Borbonicus, was created around the time of the Spanish invasion, in the traditional logophonetic script of the pre-Hispanic period, but with Spanish glosses. Painted on a single forty-six-foot-long sheet of *amatl* (bark paper), folded accordion style, the manuscript is a *tonalamatl*, or divinatory calendar. The first section features the calendar's thirteen-day periods, each with a depiction of the period's reigning deity, such as Tlaloc, the Mexica god of rain and fertility (fig. 3).

These complex pictographic narratives, combined with mythological sagas first written down in the sixteenth century, such as the *Popol Wuj*, a sacred narrative of the K'iche' Maya, shed light on the creation of the world and other cosmological subjects. Other sixteenth-century texts, such as the twelve-volume illustrated encyclopedia compiled by the Spanish missionary Bernardino de Sahagún (ca. 1499–1590) and Nahuatl informants and painters in Mexico City, record Indigenous knowledge and traditions in both Nahuatl and Spanish.



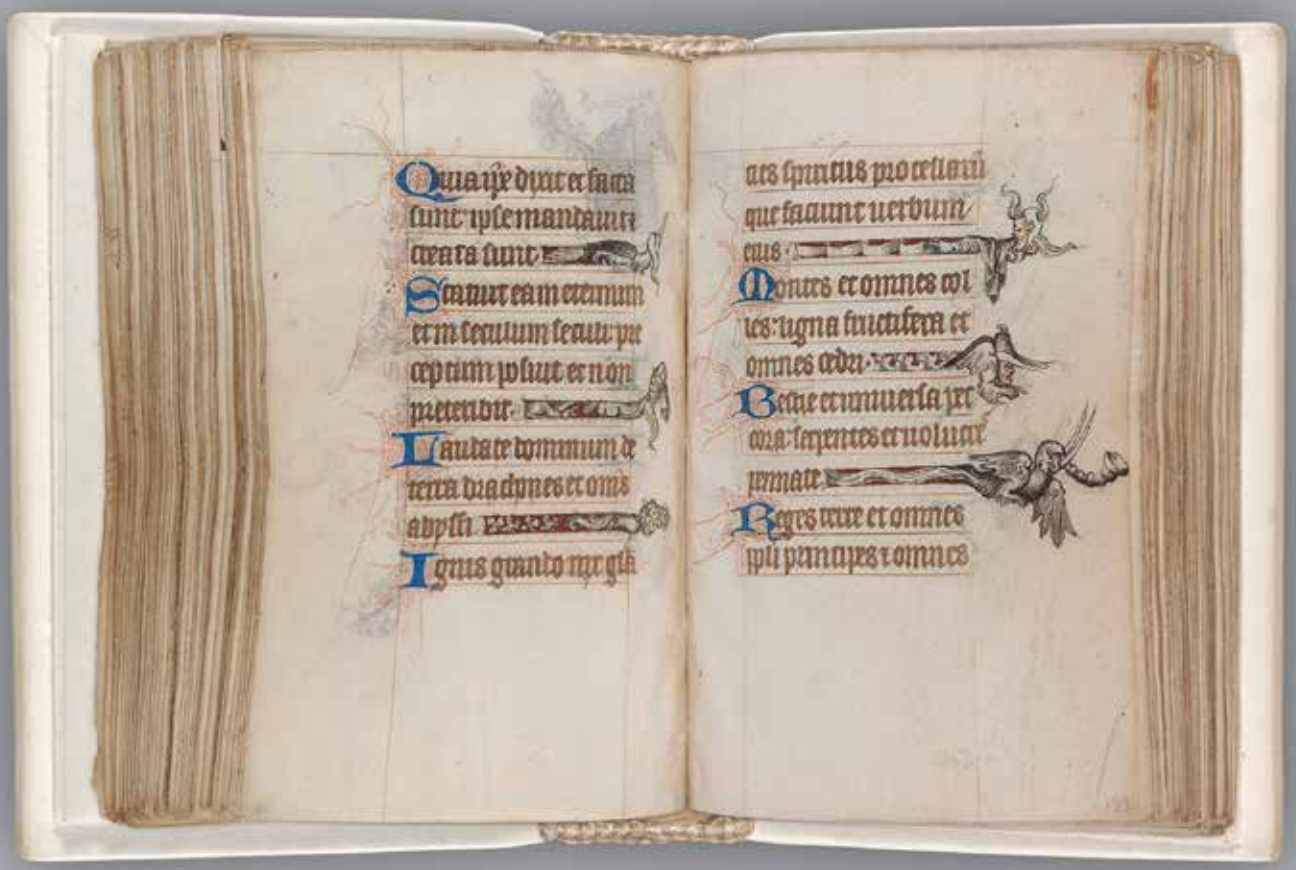
3. Detail of Codex Borbonicus, 15th century. Mexica (Aztec), Mexico. Bark paper, pigments, L. 46 ft. (1,402 cm); detail 15½ × 15¾ in. (39.4 × 40 cm). Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée Nationale, Paris

There was no tradition of writing in Central America and the Andean region before the sixteenth century. Instead, scholars rely on oral traditions, archaeology, and accounts by the Spanish priests and administrators who recorded Indigenous traditions in the colonial period to study the history of these communities. In the absence of pre-Hispanic texts, how are we to understand the formally inventive but interpretatively challenging figure on a pendant created in what is now Panama in the first millennium CE (fig. 4)? Among the earliest gold ornaments from Central America, the pendant is part of a group of artworks of uniform style and make found in Colombia, Panama, and Costa Rica. Cast in gold over a core (which remains inside), this stylized anthropomorphic figure features a human head with a body that combines traits of multiple animals, neatly encompassing elements of air, earth, and water. The figure's crenulated, double-plumed headdress invokes birds; two limbs suggest either wings or the flippers of pinnipeds; and two crouching hind legs allude to frogs. The lowest extensions are either flipper-like limbs or perhaps a notched tail. Did the composite nature of this figure fashioned from a precious material convey the all-encompassing powers of a high-status community leader who might have worn it?

4. Figure pendant, 400–900. Panama. Gold, H. 2½ in. (6.4 cm). Gift and Bequest of Alice K. Bache, 1966, 1977 (66.196.35)

At the same time, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, hybrid creatures played equally integral roles in Europe, forming part of religious belief and practice, communicating power, and expressing both individual and collective identities. At the beginning of the period between 500 and 1500 CE, polytheistic religions still thrived in parts of western Europe, although Christianity had taken hold and would become the dominant faith. Judaism was also practiced in Europe throughout this period, and the eighth century saw the arrival of Islam in the Iberian Peninsula. While it would be inaccurate to speak of Europe's dynamic, multifaith landscape as culturally unified, there did exist overlapping spheres of shared culture that, as in Mesoamerica, transcended geographies, linguistic diversities, and local customs.

The hybrids of medieval Europe included many supernatural beings that were already of great antiquity, having been born amid the polytheistic religions of ancient West Asia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, and northern Europe. These cultures' hybrids were principally composed of different animal forms or human and animal forms. Among the many ancient creatures with enduring appeal in the medieval period were the dragon, centaur, siren, griffin, and basilisk.[3] With the advent of Christianity, these beings were most often reinvented to conform to the spiritual needs of the new faith. At the same time, a smaller Judeo-Christian corpus of hybrids with biblical origins gained prominence. Shaped by these various traditions, hybrids came to form part of Christian cosmology, but the boundaries between supernatural and natural often were blurred.

A wealth of different kinds of written sources tells us about the supernatural creatures of medieval Europe. One is the Bible, which names or describes a limited but very important number of such beings, most notably angels, the messengers of God typically visualized as winged, androgynous humans. The Bible also describes a quartet of composite beings that subsequent Christian authors would interpret as symbols of the authors of the four canonical Gospels, core texts of the faith.[4] Additionally, references to dragons, typically as representations of Satan or as symbols of evil, strife, or tribulation, are found in the Bible.[5] Apart from this core sacred text, information about hybrids often appears in medieval compendia of scientific knowledge. For example, Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* includes both animals verified to be real, like elephants, and fictional creatures such as griffins.[6] The best-known medieval European source on hybrids is the Bestiary, which rose to popularity in the twelfth century and contained animal, plant, and mineral lore

5. Jean Pucelle (French, active 1319–34). The Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux, Queen of France, 1324–28. Paris, France. Grisaille, tempera, ink on vellum, single folio 3⅝ × 2⅞ in. (9.2 × 6.2 cm). The Cloisters Collection, 1954 (54.1.2)

infused with Christian moral teachings. Based on the *Physiologus*, a second-century CE Greek text, the Bestiary later gave way to an even more expansive medieval encyclopedia tradition.[7] These texts routinely combined real animals of the eastern hemisphere like lions, pelicans, and hedgehogs with such fantastical creatures as unicorns and manticores.

Did medieval Europeans believe hybrids to be real? The question may be beside the point, as these creatures carried significant metaphorical and symbolic weight and thus played important roles in their culture.[8] And even as the visual arts of medieval Europe represented conventional hybrids of great antiquity, medieval artists knowingly invented many more—plant-people, goat-snails, fish-lions, flying elephants—that elude understanding today.[9] Such combinations are frequently found cavorting in the margins of manuscripts, in dialogue with the texts they surround and reaching out to their readers, as just one page of the profusely illustrated Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux, Queen of France, attests (fig. 5).[10] As much as many of these more obscure combinations may convey context-specific information, difficult to retrieve due to their uniqueness, they also testify to an enduring desire to create new hybrids, even if they live only on a single page of one individual's prayer book.

Creatures of the Spiritual Collective

At times terrifying, at times playful, hybrid creatures were inscribed in the setting and performance of rituals and celebrations across medieval Europe and the ancient Americas. These beings were part of a visual culture that conveyed doctrine, established and reinforced identities, and defined boundaries.

In ancient Central Mexico, religious images were distributed throughout what was considered a sacred geography. They marked boundaries and crossroads; they were found in mountains, caves, and springs; they dominated public spaces such as plazas, as well as the more restricted ritual spaces of temples. Hybrid creatures were depicted on stone reliefs, mural paintings, and three-dimensional sculptures in clay or stone. In Mexica belief, one of these images was not simply

a representation; it was thought to capture the essence of the being depicted and function as an *ixiptla*, a "skin" or "covering" of the deity represented.[11] Sculptors were responsible for "revealing" divine images, or for giving visible form to sacred beings.[12]

Monumental hybrid beings were a significant presence in Mesoamerican life. Several have been found in the Mexica capital of Tenochtitlan, at the Templo Mayor, the sacred center of Mexica ritual life, located in present-day Mexico City.[13] Others have been unearthed outside the capital, including a nearly seven-foot-high figure of a bat-man hybrid found at San Mateo Tezoquipan Miraflores, a town southeast of Mexico City, at the foot of the Popocatépetl volcano (fig. 6).[14]

The standing figure has a human body and limbs and wears a typical male loincloth, but he has sharp bat claws and a bat head, with large ears and an open maw. Nocturnal creatures, bats were associated with caves—considered portals to the underworld throughout Mesoamerica—and were thought to travel between various realms of the cosmos. The figure has been identified as Tzinacantecuhtli (from *tzinacan*, "bat" in Nahuatl), a fearsome god born from the semen and blood spilled by Quetzalcoatl. As with many Mexica deities, he is at once a destructive and a generative force, associated with sacrifice, darkness, and fertility.

Made for public spaces, monumental works such as the Tzinacantecuhtli were figures of social control and visible reminders of the obligations of community members to provide sustenance to the gods in the form of blood sacrifice to ensure the continuation of the world. Other sculptures, although located in public spaces, were never meant to be seen by humans. For example, a relief depicting Tlaltecuhtli, an earth deity with clawlike hands and feet, would have been placed with the imagery facing downward on the ground, hidden from view (fig. 7). Tlaltecuhtli devoured the sun, the dead, and sacrificed victims, perhaps making their image too powerful for the mortal gaze.[15]

Tlaltecuhtli is portrayed in a splayed position often associated with women in childbirth. The god's gender, however, is ambiguous. In sixteenth-century historical documents, the being is invoked as "our mother, our father" ("*in tonan in tota*" in Nahuatl) and is sometimes

6. Tzinacantecuhtli (bat lord), 800–900. Be'ena'a (Zapotec), San Mateo Tezoquipan Miraflores, Central Mexico. Ceramic, H. 81½ in. (207 cm). Museo del Templo Mayor, INAH, Mexico City (10-263233)

7. Tlaltecuhtli (earth deity), 1450–1521. Mexica (Aztec), Central Mexico. Stone, H. 20 in. (50.8 cm). Museum Purchase, 1900 (00.5.36)

8a–c. *Tecpatl*s (ritual knives), 1502–21. Mexica (Aztec), Tenochtitlan, Central Mexico. Flint (silex), obsidian, pigment. A: Tlaloc, from Offering 52 (10-220280), H. 9 in. (22.8 cm); b: [not identified with a specific god] (10-252423), H. 6 in. (15.5 cm); c: Mictlantecuhtli, from Offering 52 (10-250230), H. 5⅞ in. (15 cm). Museo del Templo Mayor, INAH, Mexico City

described as a god and sometimes as a goddess. Here, the deity's head is thrown back to reveal an open mouth; from the divided tongue emerges a petal-shaped stone knife (*tecpatl*) intended for sacrifices. This knife in Tlaltecuhtli's maw has been interpreted as a phallic symbol that, when inserted into the deity's mouth, brings about the birth of various gods and world beings. Tlaltecuhtli thus plays a dual role in the cosmos: they are simultaneously the womb, generator of plants and human beings, and the tomb, as the insatiable devourer of blood and corpses.

A *tecpatl* itself could be a hybrid creature. Excavations at the Templo Mayor have revealed sacrificial flint knives with shell teeth and shell eyes with obsidian pupils that were ultimately deposited in offerings.[16] When animated, a *tecpatl* became a ritual effigy and also served as an *ixiptla* of a deity. At the Templo Mayor, some of these knives were inserted into separate balls of copal, so they would stand upright in the offerings.[17]

A *tecpatl* was usually made of flint, a material used to spark fire and considered by the Mexica to be a generative substance. Although similar in composition, each knife discovered at the Templo Mayor is slightly different and associated with a specific deity. For example, one *tecpatl*, made of white silex, a type of flint, preserves traces of ocher and red pigments, and has a blue mustache-like feature that identifies him as Tlaloc, the rain god (fig. 8a).[18] A second one, also made of white silex, was painted with black and blue bands and has red at the mouth, suggesting it was connected with Mictlantecuhtli, the god of death (fig. 8c). Other *tecpatl*s were ornamented with gold, miniature wooden weapons, and even the skin of a spider monkey to represent various deities from both the celestial realm and the underworld.

In both the Americas and Europe, architectural spaces and the objects within them were activated through performance. Hybrid creatures were part of the symbolism of ritual objects, conveying and layering

meanings on everything from processional staves to works intended for private devotion. Turning to medieval Christian Europe for an example, a thirteenth-century head of a crozier made in Limoges, France, illustrates one of the ways in which hybrid creatures could appear to come to life and act in the service of religious ritual (fig. 9). Originally topping a ceremonial staff carried by an ecclesiastical authority such as a bishop, the crozier head is crawling with dragons: small reptilian beasts encircle the knop and haft, and the curved crook takes the form of a long, serpentine beast. This creature focuses our attention on a struggle in the central void, between yet another dragon and the winged figure of Saint Michael the archangel. The figures enact a battle taking place at the end of time before the final Judgment of one and all before God, recounted in the New Testament in Revelation 12:7–9. The dragon represents the Antichrist, to be vanquished by Michael and his army of angels. Called "that old serpent" in the text, the Antichrist's dragon form is an allusion to the serpent that tempted Adam and Eve at the very beginning of time as told in the Old Testament book of Genesis.

In the hands of a church leader such as a bishop, a crozier was an instrument of status as well as a symbolic weapon in the struggle against evil. The bishop carrying the serpentine object in procession enacted the Church's role in effecting human salvation, initiated by Adam but only truly accomplished with Christ, the new Adam. From this perspective, the act of wielding the crozier took on the same significance as Michael spearing the dragon.[19] In another, more specific set of circumstances, a crozier's performative power became activated in the consecration of a church. In the thirteenth century, when the serpentine crozier was made, a consecrating bishop pronounced protective words intended, among other things, to symbolically expel venomous serpents, agents of evil, from the site of a new church.[20]

Like croziers, crosses on staffs were also carried in procession into the church; these could be removed and placed on the altar. Other crosses were made expressly for stationary altar display. As a symbol of Jesus's Crucifixion, the cross alluded to his bodily sacrifice, enhancing the ritual of consecrating bread and wine that would take place next to it during the Eucharist. The angels depicted on a plaque from one such cross, also made in Limoges, give a sense of the roles played by hybrid creatures in such a setting (fig. 10). The plaque is but one fragment of a large, multipanel cross that would have been placed over the representation of the crucified Christ.[21] There, the angels were positioned as witnesses to Jesus's death. On the one hand, they fulfilled familiar human roles as mourners, carrying censers (incense burners) as if presiding over earthly funerary rites. Yet these are also otherworldly creatures, symmetrically arranged against a gilded background in mirrored poses, eerily identical with their stark white faces, gold-streaked hair, and colorful haloes, wings, and garments. With their forms allying them with both earthly and cosmic realms, these supernatural creatures bridged the gap between the ritual of the altar and God in heaven above.

In some instances, even the stand for the altar cross could become a physical and symbolic extension of the

9. Head of a crozier with Saint Michael slaying the dragon, 1220–30. Limoges, France. Gilded copper, champlevé enamel, glass paste, H. 12 13/16 in. (32.5 cm). Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.834a, b)

cross itself.[22] One such base (now missing its cross), made in twelfth-century northern Italy, is small in scale but rich in compositional complexity (fig. 11). It integrates nine separate figures in three identical groupings, each consisting of a dragon supporting on its back an angel with an open book and on its head a man in ecclesiastical garb (all three men are now headless). The names inscribed on the pages of the angels' open books identify the men as three preeminent early Church authorities, Saints Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory.

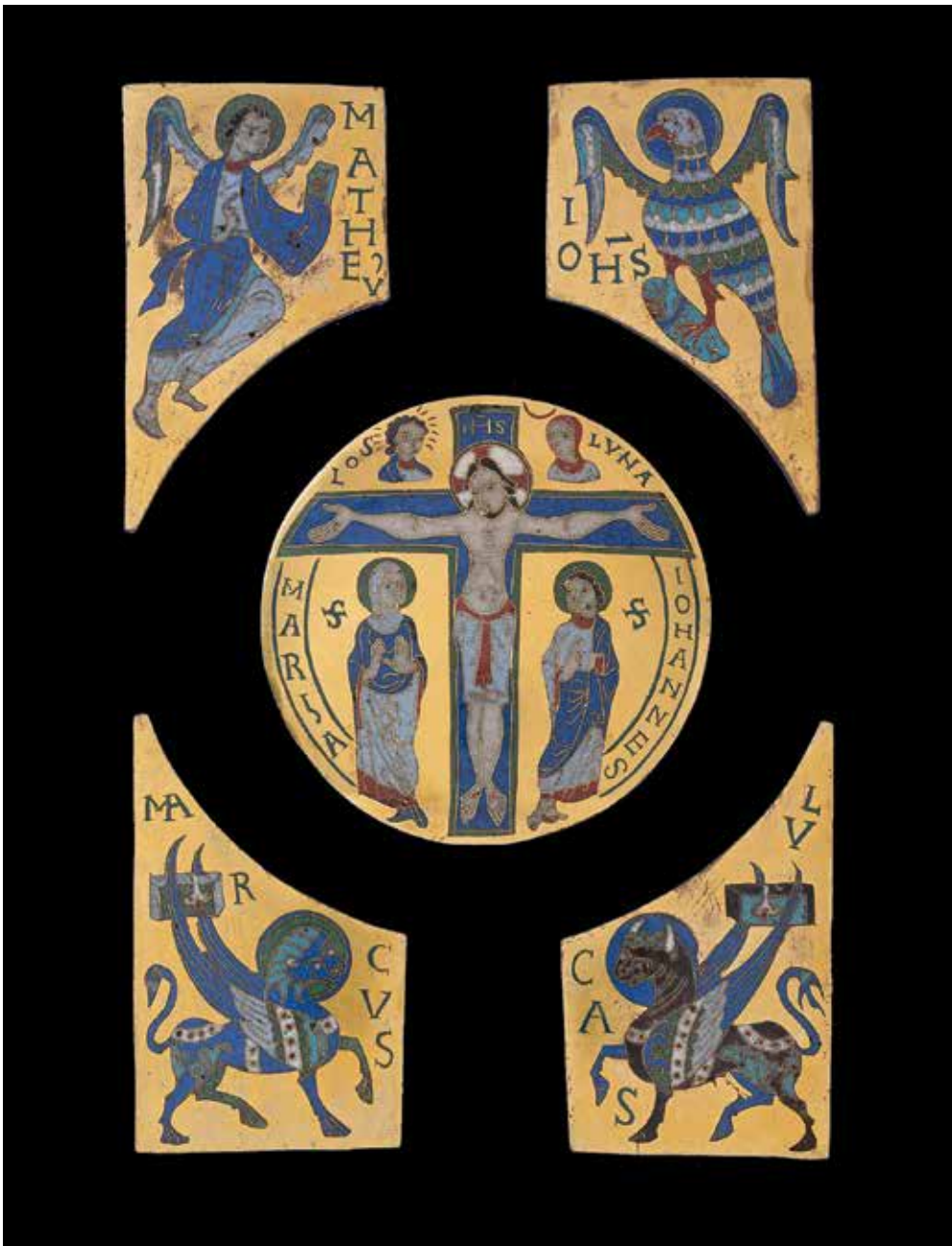
This object's composition is, at first glance, difficult to parse, despite its overall symmetry and regularity. Where does one being's form end and another's begin? Which wings belong to angels and which to dragons? Where are the dragons' tails? Once we've deciphered the forms, how are we meant to interpret them? Given that dragons are often understood as symbols of evil or sin, then the depiction of these beasts below the angels and saints evokes the suppression of evil forces by good. The angels on their backs supersede them, and their heads are trampled by the saints, just as Mary and Jesus are often shown stepping on reptilian beasts, including dragons, to represent triumph over sin. As a cross base, this object reinforces the doctrine: the angels and the saints support the sacrifice of the Crucifixion and open the way to salvation and the definitive defeat of evil. As an exercise in creating meaning through form, it functions as a kind of hybrid super creature, a puzzle for its viewers to interpret.

Angels and dragons found company with other hybrids on the medieval Christian altar table. The four creatures of the tetramorph—symbolic representations of Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the four Evangelists, or authors of the canonical Gospel books—often adorned ritual implements, including sacred texts. A group of plaques made in Conques, France, about 1100, depict the tetramorph and likely decorated the cover of a religious book (fig. 12). Each of the four corner plaques shows a different winged being, yet the ability to fly is expressed differently among the figures. The quadrupeds, the lion of Mark and the ox of Luke on the lower plaques, seem slightly more grounded, each raising a single front leg as their hind legs splay outward in demonstrations of potential energy. Above, the eagle of John (not actually a hybrid) and the man of Matthew are more buoyant despite their thin wings.[23] An additional plaque depicting the Crucifixion probably would have been placed at the center of these four.[24]

The placement of the tetramorph around the Crucifixion on a book cover accomplished a number of things. By representing the Gospel authors, the creatures confirmed the accuracy of the contents of the holy book that they decorated, since the Evangelists wrote accounts of Jesus's life, death, and Resurrection. As supernatural beings, they testified to the awesome power of the godhead, standing in for the presence of God the Father and underscoring his own authority in the biblical event being represented. Their presence

10. Plaque with censing angels, 1170–80. Limoges, France. Gilded copper, champlevé enamel, W. 8 1⅛6 in. (22.1 cm). The Cloisters Collection, 2001 (2001.634)

11. Base of an altar cross with reading angels sitting on dragons and standing Church Fathers, 1125–50. Northern Italy. Gilded-copper alloy, W. 5⅛ in. (13 cm). Rogers Fund, 1919 (19.106)



12. Plaques with the symbols of the Evangelists and the Crucifixion, ca. 1100. Conques, France. Gilded copper, champ-levé and cloisonné enamel. Evangelist plaques: H. 4 in. (10.1 cm). Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.426–.429); Crucifixion: Diam. 4⅛ in. (10.3 cm). Purchase, Michel David-Weill Gift and 2006 Benefit Fund, 2007 (2007.189)

13. Textile fragment with unicorn, deer, centaur, and lion, ca. 1500. Scandinavia, possibly Sweden. Wool intarsia and appliqué with gilded leather and linen embroidery, 52¾ × 52⅜ in. (134 × 133 cm). The Cloisters Collection, 2011 (2011.430)

14. Base for a statuette, 1470–80. South Netherlands. Boxwood, W. 4⅞ in. (12.4 cm). The Cloisters Collection, 1955 (55.116.2)

helped to transport the earthly event of Christ's death into the cosmic sphere, placing this moment within a history of salvation leading up to the accession of the saved to heaven.

The hybrid beings that formed part of medieval Christian religious life did not always take the form of creatures described in the Bible. A Scandinavian embroidered textile made to decorate the front of an altar table depicts a unicorn, deer, centaur, and lion; its inscription offers blessings to a church (fig. 13). The unicorn, often read as a symbol of Christ (the same can be said for the lion and stag), is mentioned in the Bible, but the role of the centaur, derived from Greek myth, is enigmatic.[25] Another intriguing example is a boxwood statue base that likely once supported a statuette of Mary, mother of Jesus; the object's small scale suggests it was intended for personal devotional use (fig. 14). Depicted eating fruit on the left-hand side is Eve, whose sins would be redeemed by Mary. On the right is a serpent whose human head mirrors Eve's. It has been suggested that this hybrid creature is Lilith, the legendary first wife of Adam, whose rebellious nature aligned her with the devil. If so, this representation suggests it was Lilith who enticed Eve to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Here, hybridity is employed to graft Satan's typical reptilian form with that of the human female, eliding Lilith's culpability, and by extension Eve's, with the agency of the devil himself.

Hybrids also frequently ran wild in the cloister, the heart of any medieval monastery, which was a courtyard surrounded by a covered walkway that connected the church to other essential buildings. A functionally flexible space, the cloister provided the monastic community with a setting for activities ranging from ritual procession to individual meditation.[26] The open arcades separating the yard from the walkway presented surfaces for carved images that could be instructive to the monks who spent so much time there. While not every monk approved of their presence—Saint Bernard of Clairvaux famously condemned them as expensive distractions—composite forms abounded in twelfth-century cloisters.[27] Capitals from the Benedictine monastery of Saint-Michel de Cuxa in the French Pyrenees, sculpted about 1130, depicted unexpected creatures offering rich spiritual symbolism. One includes a series of nude squatting figures on its corners (fig. 15). Two of the figures are clearly human, with youthful faces and bowl haircuts, but the species of the other two is less certain: their torsos, arms, and legs appear human, but their prominent, low brows and paw-like feet are notably simian. Not fully resembling the hairy apes depicted elsewhere in the cloister, these are actually man-ape hybrids. Meant to exploit the physical similarities between the two, these creatures aimed a moralizing message at Cuxa's monks: overcome your baser, animal urges, and spiritual and bodily discipline will bring you salvation in the afterlife.[28]

15. Capital from the cloister of Saint-Michel de Cuxa, ca. 1130. Roussillon, France. Marble, W. 17½ in. (44.5 cm). The Cloisters Collection, 1925 (25.120.634)

Monastic cloister hybrids did not always seek to moralize. An abacus from the cloister of Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, a Benedictine monastery in southeastern France, features rare examples in western European art of curious beings (fig. 16). A thick stone slab spanning two capitals, the abacus is decorated on all four sides with a repeating pattern of male heads sprouting from short stems, offshoots of a curling vine. The heads are highly varied: some have round faces and full heads of curly hair, while others are gaunt with thinner hair, and some wear skullcaps. It has been suggested that the heads represent monks at different ages and stages of their monastic careers, likely generic and anonymous types, although their heads are not shaved with tonsures, as actual monks' heads would have been.[29] It is not very common to find representations of "everyday" monks in cloistral spaces, but those instances in which contemporary monks are depicted tend to be idiosyncratic, as opposed to the fairly conventionalized iconography of, say, biblical scenes.

16. Abacus from the cloister of Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, late 12th century. Languedoc, France. Stone, D. 23⅜ in. (59.4 cm). The Cloisters Collection, 1925 (25.120.5)

How are we to interpret the heads on stems? The sculptural program of the Saint-Guilhem cloister includes an abundance of vegetal imagery: dozens of capitals and abaci are carved with acanthus leaves and vines, and the columns mimic palm trunks. Given the frequent medieval interpretation of the monastic cloister as a kind of Paradise on earth, all of this vegetation in aggregate seems intended to reinforce this idea.[30] The cloister's decorations, concentrated on the stone arcades, also may have been in dialogue with the vegetation growing at the center of the cloister courtyard, possibly a meadow-like expanse of grasses and wildflowers—a second evocation of Paradise.[31] Within this context, perhaps the monk-flower heads reinforced the idea that the monks, having chosen a life apart from the temptations of the world, have joined Paradise on earth, growing and maturing within the cloister.[32]

Not all monastic spaces were devoted exclusively to spiritual self-improvement. Others were meant to manage relationships with the outside world, and in these spaces, too, hybrid creatures found their place. A case in point is the series of frescoes made for what seems to have been a reception chamber for the abbot, the head of the monastic community, in the Benedictine monastery of San Pedro de Arlanza. Painted after 1200 in northern Spain, these monumental images of both real and hybrid animals were available to a more restricted viewership that would have taken from them a message of the monastery's power and authority (figs. 17, 18). One of these large-scale creatures is a

17. Dragon, after 1200. Burgos, Castile-León, Spain. Fresco, mounted on canvas, 10 ft. 11 in. × 11 ft. (332.7 × 335.3 cm). The Cloisters Collection, 1931 (31.38.2a, b)

18. Lion, after 1200. Burgos, Castile-León, Spain. Fresco, mounted on canvas, 10 ft. 11 in. × 11 ft. (332.7 × 335.3 cm). The Cloisters Collection, 1931 (31.38.1a, b)

19. Seahorse pendant, 400–900. Panama. Gold, H. 3¼ in. (8.3 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.779)

dragon with a long snake's body, a chicken's knobby feet, and two long, wavy horns. The other is a lion with a mannish, grimacing face, a splendid mustache, and a tail with a distinctly leaflike terminal.

Animal symbolism was a powerful force in medieval art and thought, and certain charismatic creatures, such as lions, dragons, and griffins, could project multiple and even contradictory meanings. For example, the lion could be a symbol of Christ or the devil, positive or negative. Moreover, scholars have read the Arlanza beasts alongside the vibrant Bestiary tradition that flourished in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[33] These "books of beasts" were by no means scientifically rigorous texts, but opportunities for spiritual edification that interpreted the natural world through a Christian moralizing lens. The frescoes likely were viewed, at least by some, in terms of their spiritual significance, but they were also surely meant to dazzle those who visited. As the art historian José Luis Senra has argued, Arlanza was undergoing crises of economy and identity around the year 1200, and the painted hybrid creatures represent a mode of artistic self-fashioning, projecting the monastery's strength and power through their supernatural presence.[34]

Creatures of the Court

Just as hybrid creatures could instruct and intimidate on a large scale (imagine receiving visitors in front of a massive dragon!), they could also convey their might on a smaller scale, particularly when they adorned and transformed the bodies of authority figures. In the ancient Americas, exquisitely crafted ornaments worn by high-status individuals in court rituals and other performative contexts often took the form of hybrids. Indeed, the ornamentation of the body—self-fashioning that expressed social affiliations and connections with divine power—was an important focus of aesthetic attention. The compound nature of hybrids meant that the beings had layers of abilities and meanings; this aspect also made them favored subjects for chiefly regalia.

One of the earliest gold ornaments from Central America imbues a seahorse with human attributes (fig. 19). Seahorses are uncommon subjects in ancient American art, and this rare example is depicted with imagination. The elongated body, curved tail, fins, and fishlike head with large, bulbous eyes suggest a seahorse, but the torso with square shoulders and arms that hold a bar to the mouth are human. The head is surmounted by two plumelike appendages, perhaps representing a feather headdress or simplified antlers. Loops on the bar once likely held dangling elements that contributed a kinetic quality to the ornament.

20a, b. Double crocodile pendant and double bird pendant, 950–1100. Coclé, Parita River region, Panama. A (1979.206.733): Gold, tourmaline, H. 1½ in. (3.8 cm); b (1979.206.485): Gold, rose quartz, H. 1¾ in. (4.4 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979

The different components of hybrid beings were occasionally echoed in the very materials used to create the images of them. Artists in ancient Colombia, Panama, and Costa Rica shared a common goldwork tradition, with certain local stylistic adaptations.[35] Using the lost-wax technique, metalsmiths made ornaments depicting frogs, crocodiles, and birds, as well as hybrids. Some of the ornaments portraying hybrid creatures incorporated other materials, such as semiprecious stones or shell, which may have conveyed additional concepts or imbued the beings with additional powers.

This tradition reached new heights by the end of the first millennium of the Common Era in what is now Panama. At sites such as Sitio Conte and El Caño, associated with the Coclé culture, delicate gold pendants in the shape of various hybrid creatures have been found in high-status burials.[36] Tiny yet mighty, these ornaments combine features of multiple animals in works of comparatively small scale. On one pendant, crocodilian bodies sprout what could be antlers or feathered crests and gemstone tails, while on a second, avian beaks are joined with the bodies of quadrupeds, complete with rose quartz tails (fig. 20a, b). The loops at the crocodiles' claws allowed them to be suspended from a cord; when worn, the creatures' heads would have been oriented toward the wearer's head. A third Coclé pendant in the shape of twinned creatures, composed of gold and shell, is even more ambitious in conception (fig. 21). The two heads are oriented away from each other and possess features from an impressive number of animals. The eyes, nose, and ears are bat-like; the head crest is reminiscent of an iguana crest or deer antlers; and the overall body shape is lizard-like or crocodilian.

Later ornaments from the Isthmian region, made by artists of the Chiriquí culture, combine crocodilian characteristics on more clearly anthropomorphic bodies. On one pendant, a male figure with broad shoulders holds a serpent in either hand, while four other serpent-like elements with spirals sprout from his head (fig. 22). The hybrid being on a second Chiriquí pendant has human nipples, male genitalia, and hands with five fingers and appears to wear a woven belt at the waist (fig. 23). Above the shoulders, however, crocodiles abound. The inlays for the eyes and belly are modern pyrite replacements (as with Coclé ornaments, Chiriquí pendants occasionally include other materials). The head and body were cast in two parts and linked together with a loop, allowing the pendant to move as the wearer moved, providing the potential for a kinetic effect, which was a common feature of these ornaments. A spherical metal clapper inside the head created a

21. Double crocodile pendant, 950–1100. Coclé, Parita River region, Panama. Gold, shell, H. 3¾ in. (9.5 cm). Jan Mitchell and Sons Collection, Gift of Jan Mitchell, 1991 (1991.419.17)

sound when in movement, further heightening the sensorial experience.

Zoomorphic pendants from the Tairona culture of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta region of Colombia, made in the last centuries before the Spanish invasion, are among the largest and most complex lost-wax castings known from the ancient Americas. One hollow figure pendant was cast using a gold-copper alloy; its surface was further enhanced through a process of depletion gilding, resulting in a warm, golden hue (fig. 24). This broad-shouldered male figure with an elaborate headdress takes an aggressive, arms-on-the-hips stance, holding a double-spiraled object in each hand. The nonhuman elements begin above the shoulders, including a toothy, crocodilian snout and a diamond-shaped, bat-like nose leaf.

The headdress—larger than the figure itself—is composed of swirling forms with raised eye designs that reveal and conceal animal faces among the circles, curves, spirals, and braided bands emanating from the back of the figure's head. Two large beaks project out from the cap, grasping oval-shaped ornaments that would move when the wearer moved. Connected to the beaks with six fingerlike details, the ornaments feature a motif that is repeated in masterful echoes elsewhere in the headdress.

Should the figure be read as a composite being or as a human wearing an animal mask? Or do the animal features on an otherwise human body suggest transformation and the desire to take on aspects of these powerful animals? Perhaps a hard-and-fast distinction is beside the point: the anthropologist Héctor García Botero has argued that figures combining human and animal traits conveyed the transformative power of shamanism and the essential attributes shared by human and nonhuman beings alike.[37] In contemporary Indigenous Kogi mythology, bats—nocturnal mammals that can fly—are seen as mediators and messengers between worlds. Perhaps the exuberant headdress over a static body served as a metaphor for spiritual journey and transformation.

The concept of transformation—the metamorphosis of humans into animals or vice versa—is a recurrent

22. Crocodile-head figure pendant, 700–1550. Chiriquí, Costa Rica or Panama. Gold, W. 4⅝ in. (11.7 cm).
Gift and Bequest of Alice K. Bache, 1966, 1977 (66.196.1)

23. Crocodile-head figure pendant, 700–1550. Chiriquí, Puerto González Víquez, Burica Peninsula, Costa Rica. Gold, hematite, pyrite (modern replacement) inlay, H. 6 in. (15.2 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.1064)

24. Figure pendant, 900–1600. Tairona, Sierra Nevada/Caribbean region, Colombia. Gold, W. 5¾ in. (14.6 cm). Jan Mitchell and Sons Collection, Gift of Jan Mitchell, 1991 (1991.419.31)

theme in Indigenous South American mythology. Whether temporary or enduring, these shape-shifting beings are present in origin stories and other accounts of pivotal moments in a community's history. The Huarochirí manuscript, a central Andean document from about 1608, and one of the earliest written records of Indigenous history and mythology, describes the birth and transformation of a god from five falcon eggs into fledged birds and ultimately into humans.[38] The methodological challenge, however, lies in the degree to which such myths can be used to illuminate objects created a millennium earlier.

Hybrid creatures are among the most prominent figures in later Moche art, from mural painting and ceramics to elite regalia. The Moche flourished on Peru's North Coast from about 200 to 850 CE, long before the rise of the Inca Empire in the fifteenth century. Working with hammered gold, silver, or copper sheet, or a combination of these, sometimes with inlays of highly valued stone or shell, Moche metalsmiths created an array of ornaments to adorn the body, particularly the head. Tiny mosaics of winged runners—anthropomorphized raptors, perhaps hawks—carrying small pouches were worked on the large, circular

frontals of ear ornaments (fig. 25). Each runner wears a tall trapezoidal headdress with a projecting animal head. Graceful wings stretch out from the runners' shoulders, and a rectangular element extending from their lower backs likely represents tail feathers or perhaps a back-flap, a type of body armor. Ritual running—either by a human or a zoomorphic protagonist—is one of the most frequently depicted activities in later Moche ceramics, yet in the absence of texts from this period, the precise meaning of such imagery is unknown. Avian figures are also occasionally found on Moche tapestry-woven garments and other accessories. A bag used for carrying coca leaves, for example, features a winged figure in flight, wearing a crescent headdress and carrying a club (fig. 26).

On a striking Moche gold-and-silver nose ornament, two distinct animals are combined to create a mythical bicephalic beast that seems to quiver with threatening energy (fig. 27). The bodies of intertwined serpents adorned with dozens of small, circular dangles suspended from little wires terminate in snarling canine heads with fangs bared and ears back in aggression. Suspended from the nasal septum, this nose ornament would have obscured much of the face, transforming the appearance of the wearer in a dazzling display as the dangles caught the light, animating the creatures' bodies and projecting the power of the wearer to the beholders.

Hybrid creatures were also depicted in other luxury arts in the Andes, including textiles and featherwork—media that at certain times and places were arguably more highly esteemed than metalwork. A sumptuous feather tabard—an open-sided tunic worn by men—made on Peru's North Coast in the last centuries before the rise of the Inca Empire, features winged creatures (fig. 28). On one side of the tabard (the original ornamentation does not survive on the other side), four frontal birds or birdlike creatures with spread wings sport bold red headdresses and anthropomorphic faces with fanged mouths, prominent noses, and large eyes: they are rare beings for which we currently have no clear symbolic associations.

Lest we think methodological challenges and conceptual uncertainties are strictly the domain of the

25. Pair of ear ornaments with winged runners, 400–700. Moche, North Coast, Peru. Gold, turquoise, sodalite, shell, Diam. 3 3/16 in. (8 cm). Gift and Bequest of Alice K. Bache, 1966, 1977 (66.196.40, .41)

26. Chuspa (coca bag), 650–850. Moche, North Coast, Peru. Cotton, camelid hair, 5 × 6 in. (12.7 × 15.2 cm). Bequest of Arthur M. Bullowa, 1993 (1994.35.88)

27. Nose ornament with intertwined creatures, 500–800. Moche, North Coast, Peru. Gold, silver, W. 8⁵⁄₁₆ in. (21.1 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.1225)

28. Tabard, 1400–1600. Chimú, North Coast, Peru. Cotton, feathers, plant fiber (Furcraea?), 30 × 25 in. (76.2 × 63.5 cm). Fletcher Fund, 1959 (59.135.8)

29. Bow brooch, late 6th–early 7th century. Langobardic, Central Italy. Silver, gilded silver, niello, H. 6 3/16 in. (15.7 cm). Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1955 (55.56)

30. Reverse of fig. 29

Americas, the imagery of a bow brooch from Europe is similarly confounding (fig. 29). A bow brooch, or bow fibula, is a type of ornament popular during what was known as the Migration period (roughly 300–800 CE), an era characterized by the large-scale movement of Germanic peoples all over continental Europe and the British Isles following the collapse of the Roman Empire. Migration arts were, unsurprisingly, portable, and much of what survives takes the form of bodily adornments, largely consisting of metalwork (gilded silver and niello) inlaid with semiprecious stones, glass, and bone. Migration jewelry typically combines stylized animals and geometric shapes, crammed together in dizzying patterns within narrow fields, with no apparent difference between figure and ground.

This example, attributed to the Langobardic peoples who lived south of the Elbe river, is a challenge to parse.[39] The semicircular central field of the head plate is decorated with two addorsed animals, each with a teardrop-shaped head with a recessed center suggesting an eye, a body articulated with a combination of vertical and horizontal lines, and a series of nested arches indicating feet or legs.[40] Radiating outward from the head plate are a series of boars' heads (four are missing) in dorsal view, with almond-shaped eyes and niello-striped muzzles. Moving down to the central section of the brooch, each side is adorned with two projecting creatures. More addorsed creatures, perhaps beaked birds, are found on the central panel, although this field, crowded with linear forms, is especially difficult to decipher. The foot plate features a boar's head in dorsal view, which is a slightly more elaborate version of the smaller heads projecting from the brooch's headplate. Overall, the composition is teeming with life constrained within a series of frames.[41] On the reverse of the brooch is a simply rendered human head, which would not have been visible to others when the ornament was affixed to clothing (fig. 30). The relationship between the wearer and others is interesting to consider. When viewing the brooch as pictured here, it resembles a human figure wearing an elaborate headdress and holding its short

arms and legs akimbo. If the image is turned upside down, so that the animal head at the foot is oriented upward, the brooch resembles a four-legged beast with a fan-shaped tail of additional creature heads. But is there a "right" way to view this brooch? The wearer, looking down at the object on their body, would have seen the forms one way, while others, viewing it on the wearer's body, would have seen a different orientation.

It has been argued that the formal ambiguity of objects like this one was deliberate, and that deciphering these forms was understood to require a particular visual literacy that was shared among different Migration-era groups as part of a common elite culture.[42] Surely, on another level, the brooch speaks to deeper meanings, albeit difficult to confirm. Did it play a protective, apotropaic role? Did such a design reference mythical themes of violence and chaos, destruction and rebirth? Is the image intentionally vague to underscore the blurred boundaries between human and animal? Did this ornament signify an ability to transcend boundaries, a role shamans and other ritual specialists were thought to possess?[43] What is certain is that this ornament, like those from Central and South America, communicated the wearer's identity, affiliation, and social role.

31. The unicorn rests in a garden (from the Unicorn Tapestries), 1495–1505. Paris, France (cartoon); Southern Netherlands (woven). Wool warp with wool, silk, silver, and gilded silver wefts, 12 ft. ⅞ in. × 99 in. (368 × 251.5 cm). Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr., 1937 (37.80.6)

Creatures for the Home and the Hereafter

In addition to the collective spaces of spirituality and sacred ritual, and beyond the halls of performative political power, hybrids appear on the personal effects of families and individuals. In more intimate settings, creatures could signal owners' religious beliefs, political persuasions, and social status, as well as provide edification or amusement to people of all ages. Of course, the objects one enjoyed in life could also be brought to the grave, commemorating status, identity, and an appreciation for the finer things, and, unsurprisingly, we find hybrid creatures accompanying people in death.

Among other decorations, an elite European household would have featured sumptuous textiles adorning the bodies of its members, draped over furniture, and hanging on walls. The unicorn was a beloved subject for such decorations, as attested by a tapestry woven in Brussels depicting a unicorn in a flowery meadow, lightly tethered to a tree and surrounded by a low fence (fig. 31). Thought to be part of a tapestry set depicting the hunt of a unicorn, this stand-alone image invites the viewer to appreciate the creature on its own, apart from the drama of the chase. Its defining feature—a long, slim spiral horn—grows from the forehead of this horse-goat hybrid. Its face is alert yet placid, its delicate limbs are arranged neatly below its slender body, and its curly tail gracefully defies gravity. This creature's elegance makes it an emblem of the refinement to which its owners surely aspired, while its supposed rarity (many medieval people did believe unicorns were real) made its "capture" on the tapestry a special prize.[44]

Another tapestry once intended for a domestic setting depicts a mysterious beast in a leafy landscape (fig. 32). With the mane, maw, and claws of a lion and the scaly hindquarters of a sea beast, but also a collar adorned with flowers, the creature is both ferocious and subdued. The complete, original tapestry, comprising this fragment and other portions surviving in Switzerland and Italy, depicted a series of tethered beasts led by courtly ladies and gentlemen. While it has been suggested that the leashed creatures represent vices tamed by virtuous couples, the fanciful procession of people and creatures additionally celebrated courtly refinement, a further elaboration of humankind's mastery over their animal instincts (also seen in the monastic cloister discussed earlier).[45]

32. Fragment of a tapestry or wall hanging, 1420–30. Basel, Switzerland. Wool on linen, 33⅞ × 29½ in. (85 × 75 cm). The Cloisters Collection, 1990 (1990.211)

33. Medallion, before 1227. Limoges, France. Copper, champlevé enamel, Diam. 3⅜ in. (8.7 cm). Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.796)

34. Pricket candlestick with a naked youth fighting a dragon, 1140–60. Meuse Valley, Netherlands. Gilded-copper alloy, H. 7⅝ in. (19.4 cm). Gift of George Blumenthal, 1941 (41.100.131)

Throughout the arts of medieval Europe, hybrid creatures were employed as symbolic antitypes to reinforce social relationships, in particular with respect to Christianity's perceived religious "others." Anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim ideologies, openly promoted in public settings including churches and town squares, were also visualized among Christian people's personal effects. For example, among a group of enamel and copper alloy medallions once affixed to the wooden traveling chest of a powerful Church official, Cardinal Guala Bicchieri, is one that depicts a dragon with a bearded man's head (fig. 33).[46] The creature wears a distinctive, conical hat of a type often used to represent Jewish people in medieval European art. In this instance, the hat's placement on the hybrid was meant to identify the creature with Jews; in so doing, the image unambiguously aims to dehumanize and debase an entire faith group.[47] Decorating an everyday object, the medallion demonstrates the pervasive and almost casual nature of anti-Jewish sentiment in Europe at this time.

Whether or not they were intended to support a specific ideology, household objects often represented human-hybrid combat, demonstrating social authority through species superiority. This message may be read, if generically, in a candlestick that shows a naked youth perched on the back of a small dragon, driving a spear into its open mouth while grasping the end of its long, scrolling vegetal tail (fig. 34). As improbable as the victory of an unarmored—in fact, unclothed—boy over a large, winged reptile might be, we can imagine the candlestick's owners cheering him on.

There are several different settings in which the combative candlestick could have been found, domestic or even ecclesiastical, but it is easy to imagine it set prominently amid a gathering of people, perhaps at a feasting table. Creature-shaped objects often took pride of place at such convivial gatherings. Aquamanilia, vessels used for handwashing, could be found on the tables of the wealthy, and in a number of shapes, including the eternal favorite, the unicorn (fig. 35). One vessel in the form of a dragon includes a monk disappearing between the beast's teeth (the water pours out of an opening in the man's hood), turning the tables on the theme of human triumph over beast (fig. 36). Another ingeniously merges two hybrids, a centaur and a dragon, to create the ultimate composite object: the bird-reptile, melded to the man-horse's side, forms the spout of the vessel, which was filled through a hatch in the centaur's head (fig. 37). It is easy to imagine the fascination people at a feasting table would have felt as these engaging objects appeared before them; they surely delighted in deciphering not only the components of the individual creatures but also their formal relationships with one another.[48]

35. Aquamanile in the form of a unicorn, ca. 1425–50. Nuremberg, Germany. Copper alloy, H. 15½ in. (39.4 cm). Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1964 (64.101.1493)

36. Aquamanile in the form of a dragon, ca. 1200. Northern Germany. Copper alloy, 8¾ in. (22.2 cm). The Cloisters Collection, 1947 (47.101.51)

37. Aquamanile in the form of a crowned centaur fighting a dragon, 1200–1225. Possibly Hildesheim, Lower Saxony, Germany. Copper alloy, H. 14⅜ in. (36.5 cm). Rogers Fund, 1910 (10.37.2)

38. Dish, 1425–50. Spain. Tin-glazed earthenware, Diam. 14 in. (35.6 cm). The Cloisters Collection, 1956 (56.171.110)

Once hands were washed, more creatures accompanied food and drink. These could be playful, like the stylized blue dragon cavorting and sticking out its curly tongue, placed somewhat incongruously inside an inscription reading "Ave Maria" (Hail Mary) on a Spanish tin-glazed earthenware dish (fig. 38). They might have been visible primarily to a vessel's user, such as the three-winged, reptilian creatures with different heads—human, avian, and animal—that lurk amid a field of foliage on a gilded-silver hanap, or drinking bowl, from the Balkans (fig. 39). Other vessels displayed their creature decorations for others to see, so that they might enjoy them, or, more likely, be impressed or intimidated by them. The intertwined dragons and men engraved on the bowl of a gilded-silver English or Scandinavian cup were invisible to the drinker when the cup was raised, but dazzling to those who watched the drinker take a large gulp—although the drinker, holding the bowl in their hands, would have touched the raised heads of both men and dragons, feeling on their fingers the creatures' impressive power even if they could not see it (fig. 40).

39. Hanap (drinking bowl), 1350–75. Eastern Europe, possibly Bosnia or Serbia. Silver, gilded silver, Diam. 6 15/16 in. (17.6 cm). The Cloisters Collection, 1947 (47.101.42)

40. Bowl of a drinking cup, late 12th century. England or Scandinavia. Silver, gilded silver, niello, Diam. 6⅞ in. (17.5 cm).
The Cloisters Collection, 1947 (47.101.31)

41. Bird with jar, 200–800. Moche, North Coast, Peru. Ceramic, slip, H. 11⁹⁄₁₆ in. (29.4 cm). The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.748)

Turning to the ancient Americas, composite creatures appear on a range of vessel types in Moche art, including serving vessels, but the largest number occur on a type of ritual vessel known as a stirrup-spout bottle. Although some may have been used before they were deposited in tombs, they were primarily used as grave goods.[49] Early Moche stirrup-spout bottles were often shaped in the form of animals; they are true-to-life sculptural representations without any apparent preternatural elements. In later periods, composite creatures become more common and take the form of effigies or are painted on the body of a vessel, either singly or in a complex scene.

One bottle has the form of a bird-human holding a ceramic jar (fig. 41). Anthropomorphic birds wearing women's attire are also known from scenes painted on ceramic vessels, where they appear to be ritual attendants, interchangeable with female participants. More often, anthropomorphized animals, including iguanas, crayfish, crabs, foxes, and raptors, are depicted as warriors. As with many ancient Egyptian gods, the body is essentially human, the head zoomorphic. Another bottle presents a bird warrior on bended knee, with all the elements of a combatant's battle regalia, including a club and shield (fig. 42). The bird is likely a hawk, a notably effective hunter.

The selection of animals depicted as warriors was not random: Moche artists and their patrons chose creatures known to be fierce fighters or cunning hunters. Over time, these hybrid creatures took on an increasingly important role in Moche art, particularly in fineline painting, a style characterized by detailed figures and scenes delicately painted in a reddish slip on a cream background.[50] Some protagonists are humans, shown hunting or engaged in rituals or combat; others are enigmatic beings such as the two highly active

42. Stirrup-spout bottle with bird warrior, 500–800. Moche, North Coast, Peru. Ceramic, slip, H. 10¼ in. (26 cm). Gift of Nathan Cummings, 1963 (63.226.8)

43. Stirrup-spout bottle with fox warrior, 500–800. Moche, North Coast, Peru. Ceramic, slip, H. 11¾ in. (29.8 cm).
Gift of Henry G. Marquand, 1882 (82.1.29)

44. Stirrup-spout bottle with peanut figure, 500–800. Moche, North Coast, Peru. Ceramic, slip, H. 8 in. (20.3 cm). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Cummings, 1964 (64.228.37)

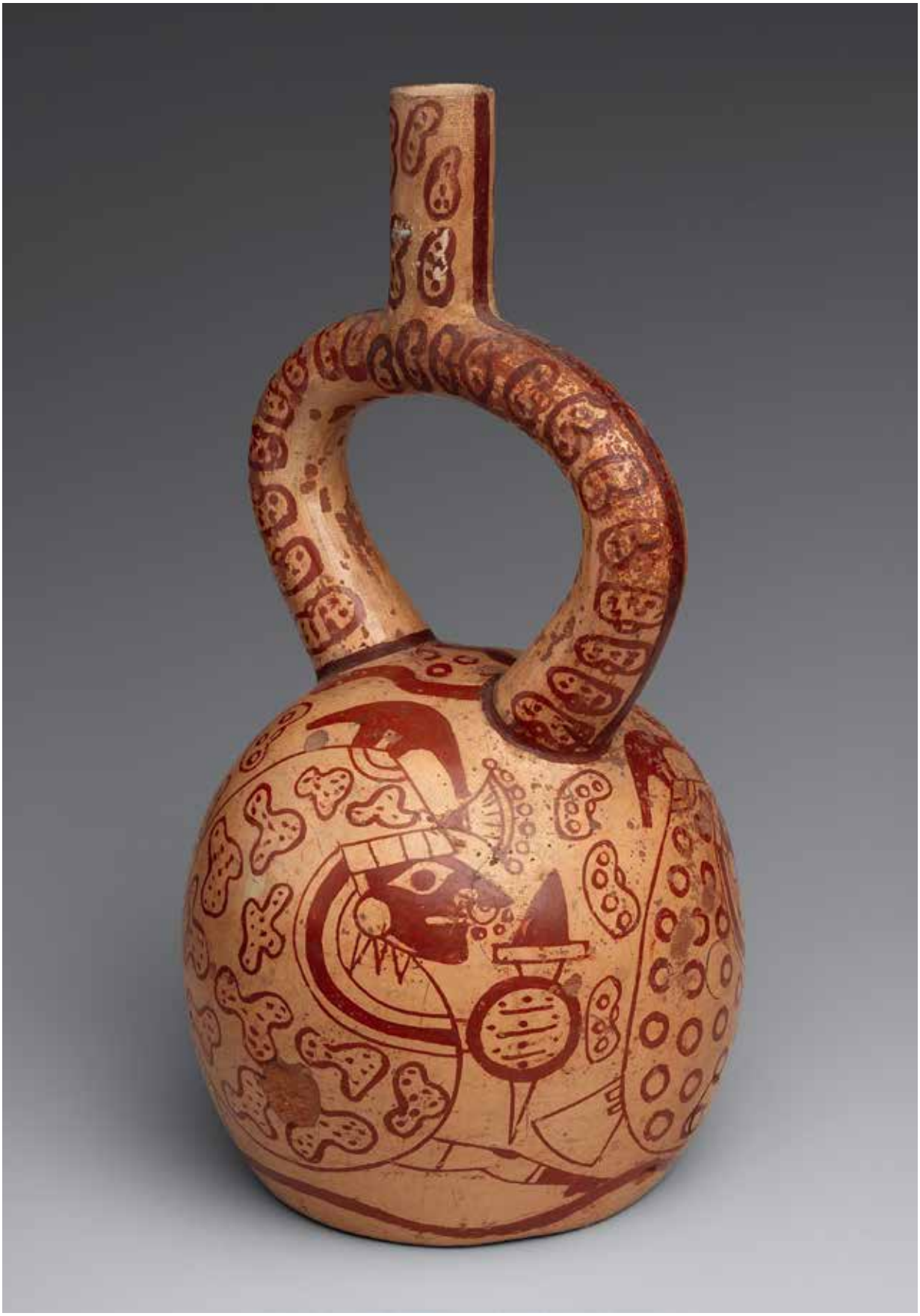
45. Tuber-inspired stirrup-spout bottle, 600–800. Moche, North Coast, Peru. Ceramic, slip, H. 12½ in. (31.8 cm). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Cummings, 1964 (64.228.57)

human-fox warriors dressed in full battle regalia on one bottle (fig. 43). The two warriors with human bodies and fox heads carry round shields and war clubs and run across a hilly desert landscape. As with hawks, foxes were surely seen as appropriate symbols of Moche warfare and practices of ritual sacrifice: foxes hunt and capture small prey, much as warriors would fight and capture prisoners.

Hybrid creatures composed of human and animal, or two different species in one being, abound in many visual traditions. But what of the vegetable world? Phytomorphs or phytoforms—conventionalized representations of anthropomorphized plants—are less common in the visual arts, but they present intriguing opportunities for considering human-plant interactions. In the first five hundred years of the Common Era, Moche artists created ceramic vessels in the shape of various botanical species such as gourds, revealing a close observation of nature. In later centuries, artists increasingly anthropomorphized legumes and tubers. Some, such as beans, were among the staple crops of the Moche; others, such as peanuts, were more closely associated with feasting and ritual practice.

There is a strong sense of emergence in these representations, as if the anthropomorphic elements were bursting out from their plant membranes. One peanut-shaped stirrup-spout vessel contains a figure on its side, arms close to the body, who seems to sprout from the textured shell of the peanut (fig. 44).[51] Peanuts were cultivated in Peru as early as 5,000 BCE and were generally connected with elite culture; they were depicted in restricted contexts, such as lordly regalia.[52] Peanuts, perhaps due to the subterranean development of their fruit, were also closely associated with funerary practices: plates of them were part of meals offered to the dead. Inherent in this idea is not simply nourishment but also the concept of regeneration: the peanut is the seed for a new plant, and thus the vessel may reference ideas of rebirth and new life.

Ancient American phytomorphs often featured geophytes, plants that bear their perennating buds below the surface of the soil—linking them conceptually with the world of the dead. As the art historian Lisa Trever has argued, tubers and other plants whose fruits gestate below ground also offer the promise of rebirth.[53] Interestingly, geophytes were employed to create hybrid warriors: one vessel possesses a trunk like a potato, from which sprouts eight manioc roots to form limbs and tails (fig. 45). The creature's neck is rendered as a manioc stem, recognizable by the growth buds, or "eyes," from



46. Stirrup-spout bottle with bean warriors, 500–800. Moche, North Coast, Peru. Ceramic, slip, H. 11½ in. (29.2 cm). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Cummings, 1964 (64.228.6)

which a human head with a crescent-shaped headdress emerges. The head's fangs, however, are decidedly not human but zoomorphic, adding a threatening, predatory component to this composite warrior creature.

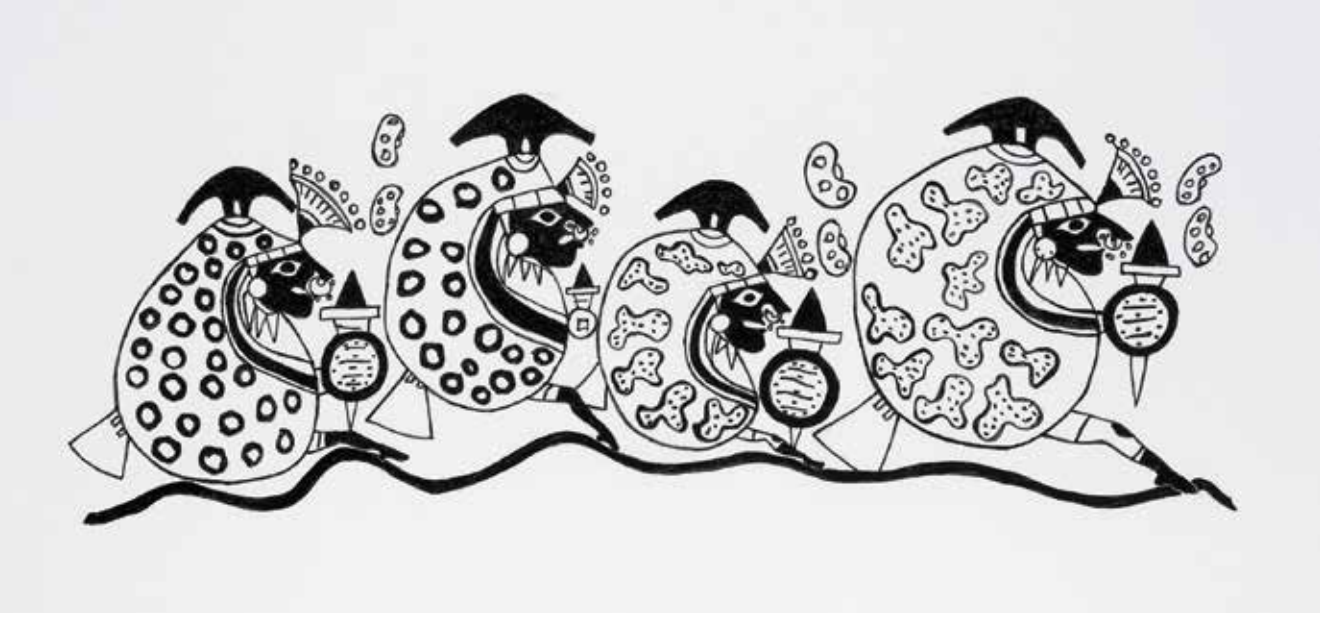
A striking characteristic of many of these animated phytomorphs is their aggression: these vegetables could be violent. The most bellicose among them are the smallest: lima beans. They appear both as normal (unanthropomorphized) beans and as anthropomorphized legumes in fineline painting on ceramic vessels.[54] In one example, four large bean warriors are painted on the bottle's chamber (figs. 46, 47). They have bodies in the shape of a bean, with faces rendered at the hilum. Each warrior wears a headdress surmounted by a crescent-shaped ornament, along with a nose ornament, ear spools, and backflaps, and each carries a shield and a mace. A single, elegant leg extends forward from each bean, indicating its swift movement. The artist added additional (not obviously animated) beans between and above the figures and along the vessel's spout.

What role did these hybrid creatures play on Moche vessels in their intended funerary context? Are these vessels about planning for a continued existence beyond death? Were phytomorphs intended to provide sustenance and protection? Did the strong sense of emergence, of sprouting life, in the vessels' forms and painted surfaces convey metaphorical ideas of rebirth? Did the fact that the tubers and legumes are armed add an additional layer of protection and security to the tombs in which the vessels were essential elements of elite burial assemblages?

Turning north to what is now Mexico or Guatemala, a Maya bowl articulates the relationship between its function as a vessel and its status as a grave good (figs. 48, 49). One of its sides is decorated with a complex underworld scene dominated by an undulating being, seen in profile, combining attributes of a centipede and a feathered serpent, from whose jaws a young figure emerges. A similar scene is repeated on the other side of the vessel.

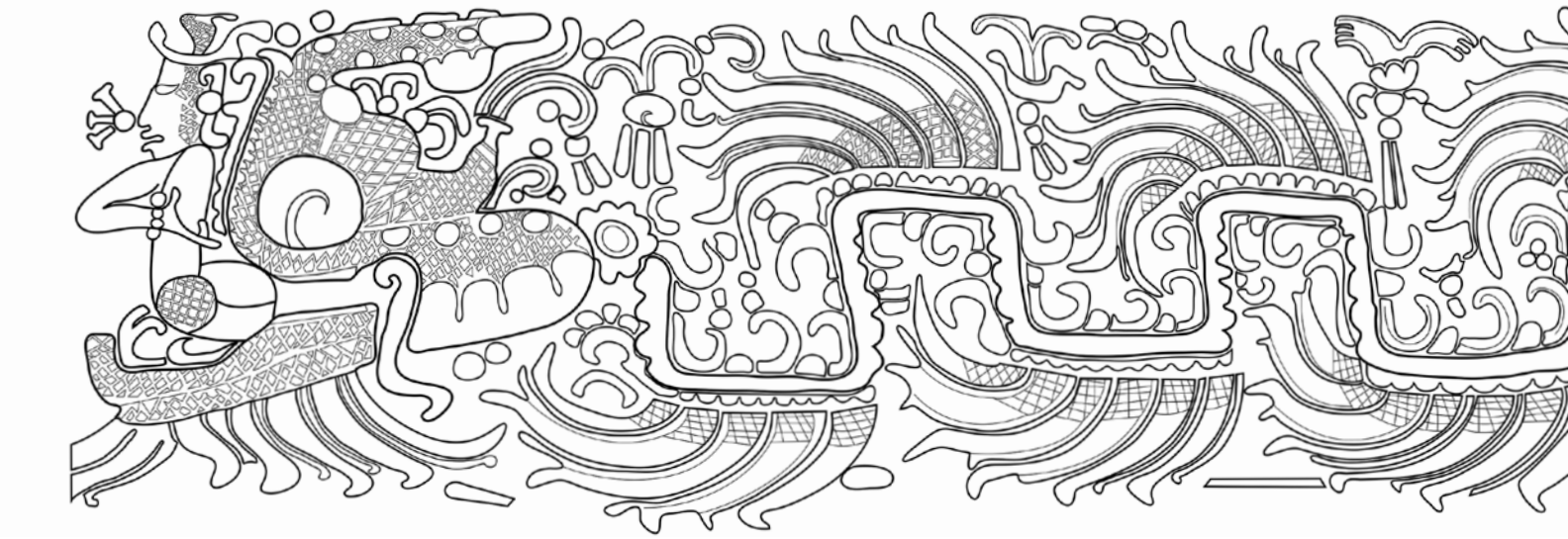
The repeated creature's massive head has crosshatching, a convention in Maya art for depicting the scaly skin of centipedes and snakes, along with a spiral eye, denoting nocturnal animals such as centipedes, snakes, and jaguars. The creature's wide-open maw reveals multiple teeth and fangs. Its snakelike body curves, with sprays of feathers at the tops and bottoms of the arches, and culminates in a tail shaped like a sprouting plant. A young man, also seen in profile, emerges from the creature's jaws. On the right side of the drawing, he is bedecked in jade jewelry and holds a cup from which another version of the feathered centipede creature seems to arise. The man coming out of the second creature's mouth is more simply adorned, with some scaly patches on his head and torso, and he crosses his right arm in front of his chest.

Centipedes (the common name for arthropods belonging to the class Chilopoda) are nocturnal animals that live in moist soil filled with decaying leaves and/or wood debris. They have segmented bodies with multiple appendages and legs; they are swift, and their bodies undulate in a wavelike lateral motion as they move.



47. Rollout drawing of fig. 46

48. Bowl, 500–600. Maya, Guatemala or Mexico. Ceramic, Diam. 9¼ in. (23.5 cm). Purchase, Fletcher Fund and Arthur M. Bullowa Bequest, 2000 (2000.60)



49. Rollout drawing of fig. 48

They are also carnivorous, nocturnal hunters known for using their poisonous claws to paralyze their prey. While centipedes were connected with death and the underworld in Maya belief, their jaws were believed to generate new life and were associated with childbirth, the rebirth of deities, and the resurrection of ancestors.[55] The emergence of two young men from the jaws of the centipede-snake, therefore, likely represents an underworld birth, or rebirth—a hopeful message and suitable imagery for a vessel that was surely once part of a funerary assemblage.

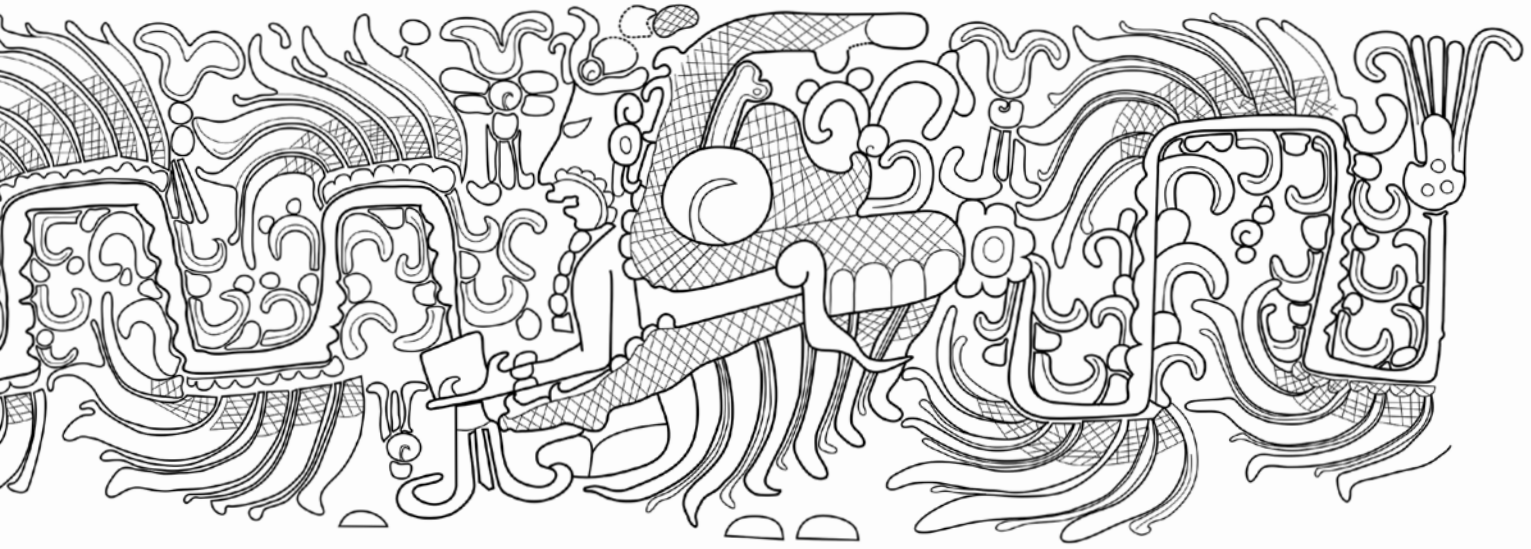
Creatures Among Us

Hybrid creatures, drawn from elements in nature, compound features and attributes in ways that are impossible in nature. In their characteristic crossing of species-specific boundaries, they themselves often appear capable of traversing social and conceptual boundaries and of enacting dramatic interventions in the lives of mortals. These are beings that force us beyond the mundane while, paradoxically, helping us to reify and define it. In doing so, they provide an exceptional space for confronting anxieties and expressing hopes.

In the modern age, we may readily dismiss hybrids as figments of the imagination and scoff at premodern people's willingness to believe in them. And yet, it remains clear that in some ways we still believe they exist—or at least want them to. They thrive in contemporary popular culture: hippogriffs inhabit the universe of Harry Potter, dragons form the heart of Game of Thrones, and unicorns are eternally popular in children's toys.

In their modern riff on the centuries-old tradition of the Bestiary, the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges and his coauthor Margarita Guerrero address the appeal of the hybrid, as well as its conceptual uncertainties: "We do not know what the dragon *means*, just as we do not know the meaning of the universe, but there is something in the image of the dragon that is congenial to man's imagination, and thus the dragon arises in many latitudes and ages. It is, one might say, a *necessary* monster."[56]

Contemporary writers and multimedia creators continue to create hybrid creatures, from *Alien*'s Xenomorph to Murderbot. In an era of the exploding possibilities of AI, cyborgs, in their amalgamation of organic and synthetic parts, and ganimals, AI-generated hybrids, remind us of the persistent and powerful impulse to combine and compound. Hybrid creatures remain in our minds as beings of terror and delight, revulsion and fascination, menace and benevolence, in the same way their source—the still only partly known and understood natural world—is an inescapable and central factor in human experience. Above all, these creatures of myth and imagination provide us ways of thinking about essential questions: they help us understand who we are, and where our boundaries lie. Perhaps these fantastic creatures perpetuate the continued presence in our human consciousness of a deep-seated refusal to accept that the known encompasses everything.



Notes

1. Valentino Pace, *Una Bibbia in avorio: Arte mediterranea nella Salerno dell'XI secolo* (Itaca, 2016), 46.

2. Jorge Luis Borges with Margarita Guerrero, "Foreword to the First Edition: An Anthology of Fantastic Zoology," in *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, trans. Andrew Hurley (Viking Penguin, 2005), xii. For further discussion of the real/imaginary question, see Boria Sax, *Imaginary Animals: The Monstrous, the Wondrous and the Human* (Reaktion Books, 2013).

3. For hybrids in the ancient Mediterranean, see Jeremy McInerney, *Centaurs and Snake-Kings: Hybrids and the Greek Imagination* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

4. St. Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, The Fathers of the Church 117 (Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 55.

5. Charity Urbanski, *Medieval Monstrosity: Imagining the Monstrous in Medieval Europe* (Routledge, 2024), 243–44.

6. Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. and trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 252.

7. Elizabeth Morrison with Larisa Grollemond, eds., *Book of Beasts: The Bestiary in the Medieval World*, exh. cat. (J. Paul Getty Museum, 2019), especially 3–12, 238–59. For a translation of Bestiary text, see Willene B. Clark, *A Medieval Book of Beasts: The Second-Family Bestiary*; *Commentary, Art, Text and Translation* (Boydell Press, 2006).

8. Pamela Gravestock, "Did Imaginary Animals Exist?," in *The Mark of the Beast: The Medieval Bestiary in Art, Life, and Literature*, ed. Debra Hassig (Garland Publishing, 1999), 119–39.

9. Many of these creatures have experienced a recent resurgence of popularity in social media. See, for example, the Instagram account @weirdmedievalguys and its related publication, Olivia M. Swarthout, *Weird Medieval Guys: How to Live, Laugh, Love (and Die) in Dark Times* (Square Peg Books, 2023).

10. Lucy Freeman Sandler, "Reflections on the Construction of Hybrids in English Gothic Marginal Illustration," in *Studies in Manuscript Illumination 1200–1400* (Pindar Press, 2008), 12–32.

11. Alfredo López Austin, *Cuerpo humano e ideología: Las concepciónes de los antiguos nahuas I*, vol. 1 (Universidad Autónoma de México, 1980); and *Los mitos del tlacuache: Caminos de la mitología mesoamericana* (Alianza Editorial Mexicana, 1990).

12. Leonardo López Luján and Marie France Fauvet-Berthelot, "The Sculptural Art of the Mexica and Their Neighbors," in *Monumental Mexica Sculpture*, ed. Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and Leonardo López Luján (Fundación Conmemoraciones, 2010), 71–113.

13. Leonardo López Luján, *La Casa de las Águillas: Un ejemplo de la arquitectura religiosa en Tenochtitlan* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006), 1:94.

14. José Francisco Hinojosa, "Rescate arqueológico en Miraflores, municipio de Chalco, Edo. de México, de dos esculturas de barro huecas: El dios murciélago y el dios Xipe Tótec," Archivo Técnico, Coordinación Nacional de Arqueología, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1990.

15. Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, "Tlaltecuhtli: Señor de la Tierra," *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 27 (December 1997): 15–40, https://nahuatl.historicas.unam.mx/index.php/ecn/article/view/77940.

16. Leonardo López Luján has shown that this organization responded to a ritual syntax, in which each element operated as a sign that acquired meaning when combined with others. See, among others, Leonardo López Luján, *The Offerings of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan* (University of New Mexico Press, 2005).

17. Copal was primarily obtained from *Bursera bipinata*, a Mesoamerican species of trees. See Aurora Montúfar López, "Copal de Bursera bipinnata: Una resina mesoamericana de uso ritual," *Trace* 70 (2016): 5–77.

18. Alejandra Aguirre Molina, "Los cuchillos de pedernal ataviados de las ofrendas del Templo Mayor de Tenochtitlan" (PhD diss., Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2021), 281, 285.

19. Kshanti Gamage, "L'usage épiscopal des crosses serpentiformes en émail de l'oeuvre de Limoges (XIIIe siècle): Performance et représentation," *Histoire de l'Art* 88 (2021): i–xii.

20. Jitske Jasperse, "Looking at and Listening to the Limoges Crozier in Toledo Cathedral," *Archivo Español de Arte* 96, no. 384 (2023): 455.

21. Barbara Drake Boehm, "Plaque with Censing Angel," in *Recent Acquisitions: A Selection, 2001–2002, The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 60, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 11.

22. Elizabeth Parker McLachlan, "Liturgical Vessels and Implements," in *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan and E. Ann Matter (Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 415–20.

23. Elisabeth Taburet-Delahaye, "Four Plaques: Symbols of the Evangelists," in *Enamels of Limoges 1100–1350*, exh. cat. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996), 76–77.

24. The Crucifixion plaque was acquired ninety years after the Evangelist symbols. While it has not been definitively proven that all five plaques went together, some remarkable material and chemical correspondences at least suggest they were made in the same place at a similar time.

25. Inger Estham, "A Newly Discovered Intarsia and Gold Leather Embroidery," in *Opera Textilia Variorum Temporum*, ed. Inger Estham and Margareta Nockert (Statens Historiska Museum, 1988), 93–110.

26. For an overview of functions, see Paul Meyvaert, "The Medieval Monastic Claustrum," *Gesta* 12, no. 1/2 (1973): 53–59.

27. Meyer Schapiro, "On the Aesthetic Attitude in Romanesque Art," in *Romanesque Art* (George Braziller, 1977), 6.

28. Thomas E. A. Dale, "Monsters, Corporeal Deformities, and Phantasms in the Cloister of St-Michel-de-Cuxa," *The Art Bulletin* 83, no. 3 (2001): 414–18.

29. Géraldine Mallet, "Le cloître de Gellone à Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert (France, Hérault): Pour une nouvelle approche de la sculpture à travers les représentations végétales et figurées," in *Medioevo: Natura e Figura; Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi, Parma, 20–25 settembre 2011*, ed. Arturo Carlo Quintavalle (Skira, 2015), 440.

30. For the cloister as an evocation of Paradise, see Paul Meyvaert, "The Medieval Monastic Garden," in *Medieval*

Gardens, ed. Elisabeth B. MacDougall (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1986), 50–53; Pascale Bourgain, "Un jardin au coeur du cloître: Fonction, images, imaginaire," *Les Cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa* 46 (2015): 167–77.

31. Mailan S. Doquang, *The Lithic Garden: Nature and the Transformation of the Medieval Church* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 81–84. Julia Perratore, "Saint-Guilhem, la maîtrise du lieu sauvage," *Les Cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa* 55 (2024): 63–76.

32. Jean Leclercq, "Le cloître est-il un paradis?," in *Le message des moines à notre temps*, ed. Pietro Fumasoni Biondi (A. Fayard, 1958), 141–59.

33. Walter Cahn, "The Frescoes of San Pedro de Arlanza," in *The Cloisters: Studies in Honor of the Fiftieth Anniversary*, ed. Elizabeth C. Parker with the assistance of Mary B. Shepard (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 87–109; Montserrat Pagès i Paretas, "Les pintures de San Pedro de Arlanza i els bestiaris anglesos del 1200," in *Contextos 1200 i 1400: Art de Catalunya i art de l'Europa meridional en dos canvis de segle*, ed. Rosa Alcoy Pedrós (Universitat de Barcelona, 2012), 2:229–40; and José Luis Senra, "Y vivía entre las fieras, pero los ángeles le servían: Poder, saber y representación abacial en el monasterio de San Pedro de Arlanza," in *En busca del saber: Arte y ciencia en el Mediterráneo medieval*, ed. Alexandra Uscatescu and Irene González Hernando (Ediciones Complutense, 2018), 345–55.

34. Senra, "Y vivía entre las fieras," 333–66.

35. Colin McEwan and John W. Hoopes, eds., *Pre-Columbian Art from Central America and Colombia at Dumbarton Oaks* (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2021).

36. Joanne Pillsbury, Timothy F. Potts, and Kim N. Richter, eds., *Golden Kingdoms: Luxury Arts in the Ancient Americas*, exh. cat. (J. Paul Getty Museum and Getty Research Institute, 2017).

37. Héctor García Botero, "Metalwork in Ancient Colombia," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, December 5, 2024, https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/metalwork-in-ancient-colombia. See also David Wengrow, *The Origins of Monsters: Image and Cognition in the First Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Princeton University Press, 2013).

38. Frank Salomon, George L. Urioste, and Francisco de Avila, *The Huarochirí Manuscript: A Testament of Ancient and Colonial Andean Religion* (University of Texas Press, 1991).

39. Stephen Foltiny, "Langobardic Fibulae from Italy in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York," *Acta Toscana* 1 (1974): 27.

40. Katherine Reynolds Brown, *Migration Art, A.D. 300–800* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), 33–34.

41. Katherine Reynolds Brown, *Guide to Provincial Roman and Barbarian Metalwork and Jewelry in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981), 24–25; Leslie Webster, "Encrypted Visions: Style and Sense in the Anglo-Saxon Minor Arts, A.D. 400–900," in *Anglo-Saxon Styles*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov and George Hardin Brown (State University of New York Press, 2003), 14.

42. Charlotte Behr, "The Power and Function of Images in Northern Europe during the Migration Period," *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 4 (2010): 453–66.

43. Behr, "Power and Function," 460–63.

44. Barbara Drake Boehm, *A Blessing of Unicorns: The Paris and Cloisters Tapestries*, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 78, no. 1 (Summer 2020).

45. William D. Wixom, "Aquamanile in the Form of a Lion," in *Mirror of the Medieval World*, ed. William D. Wixom, exh. cat. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), 173–74. See also Anna Rapp Buri and Monika Stucky-Schürer, *Zahm und Wild: Basler und Strassburger Bildteppiche des 15. Jahrhunderts* (Von Zabern, 1990), 116–19.

46. Barbara Drake Boehm, "Fourteen Medallions," in *Enamels of Limoges*, 288–91.

47. Sarah Lipton, *Dark Mirror: The Medieval Origins of Anti-Jewish Iconography* (Metropolitan Books; Henry Holt and Company, 2014), 16–45. For the medallion's anti-Jewish message, see Sherry C. M. Lindquist and Asa Simon Mittman, *Medieval Monsters; Terrors, Aliens, Wonders*, exh. cat. (Morgan Library and Museum, 2018), 95.

48. Peter Barnet and Pete Dandridge, eds., *Lions, Dragons, and Other Beasts: Aquamanilia of the Middle Ages, Vessels for Church and Table* (Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, 2006), 3–17, 88–91, 98–101, 158–61.

49. Jeffrey Quilter, "Uses and Users of Moche Painted Vessels," in *Picture Worlds: Storytelling on Greek, Moche, and Maya Pottery*, ed. David Saunders and Megan E. O'Neil, exh. cat. (J. Paul Getty Museum, 2024), 53–55.

50. Christopher B. Donnan and Donna McClelland, *Moche Fineline Painting: Its Evolution and Its Artists* (UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1999).

51. On the gender of this figure, see Eva Zapata Signorino, "Stirrup-spout bottle with peanut figure," website entry, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/307871.

52. Lindi J. Masur, Jean-François Millaire, and Michael Blake, "Peanuts and Power in the Andes: The Social Archaeology of Plant Remains from the Virú Valley, Peru," *Journal of Ethnobiology* 38, no. 4 (2018): 589–609.

53. Lisa Trever, "A Moche Riddle in Clay: Object Knowledge and Art Work in Ancient Peru," *The Art Bulletin* 101, no. 4 (2019): 18–38. See also Hugo C. Ikehara-Tsukayama, Dawn Kriss, and Joanne Pillsbury, *Containing the Divine: Ancient Peruvian Pots*, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 80, no. 4 (2023).

54. Gail Ryser, "Moche Bean Warriors and the Paleobotanic Record: Why Privilege Beans?," in *Arqueología Mochica: Nuevos enfoques*, ed. Luis Jaime Castillo et al. (Institut Français d'Études Andines and Fondo Editorial de la Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2008), 397–409.

55. On centipedes and serpents, see Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos, "Where Children Are Born: Centipedes and Feminine Sexuality in Ancient Mesoamerica," in *Sorcery in Mesoamerica*, ed. Jeremy D. Coltman and John M. D. Pohl (University Press of Colorado, 2020), 206–35. See also Karl Taube, "Maws of Heaven and Hell: The Symbolism of the Centipede and Serpent in Classic Maya Religion," in *Antropología de la eternidad: La muerte en la cultura maya*, ed. Andrés Ciudad-Ruiz, Mario Humberto Ruz, and María Josefa Iglesias Ponce de León (Sociedad Española de Estudios Mayas, 2003), 405–42.

56. Borges with Guerrero, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, xii.

Acknowledgments

Numerous people helped us with *Creatures of Myth and Imagination*. For their support of this *Bulletin* and exhibition, we thank Max Hollein, Marina Kellen French Director and Chief Executive Officer, as well as Andrea Bayer, Inka Drögemüller, Quincy Houghton, Alisa LaGamma, Ceil and Michael E. Pulitzer Curator in Charge of The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, and C. Griffith Mann, Michel David-Weill Curator in Charge of the Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters. This project could not have been achieved without the tireless efforts of Amelia Roché Hyde, Sophia Figuereo, and Andrew Winslow.

In the Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters, we are indebted to Christina Alphonso, Christine Brennan, Michael Carter, Jeff Elliott, Shirin Fozi, Paul and Jill Ruddock Associate Curator, and Melanie Holcomb. In The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, we thank Jessi Atwood, Stephanie Fischer, Damien Marzocchi, Matthew Noiseux, Mark Ostrander, David Rhoads, and Lydia Shaw. Additional thanks are owed to Mary F. Allen, Clara Maria Apostolatos, Harrison Carter, Chelsea Garunay, Joachim Hackl, Martina Lentino, Aileen Marcantonio, and Christina Westpheling.

Many conservators prepared the objects for the exhibition, including Linda Borsch, Abby Cottier, Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship, Conservation Junior Fellow, Christine Giuntini, Lucretia Kargère, Dawn Kriss, Lauren Posada, Jennifer Schnitker, Kathrin Stoltenberg, and Wendy Walker.

We are particularly indebted to our editor, Anne Blood Mann, and other members of the talented team behind this *Bulletin*, including Shannon Cannizzaro, Robyn C. Fohouo, Christina Grillo, and Jenn Sherman. Wilson Santiago, Bruce Schwarz, and Peter Zeray coordinated and took the new photography. Julia Ma at Miko McGinty Inc. designed this elegant issue.

Additional thanks go to Alejandra Aguirre, Judith Alva Sánchez, Carlos Brody, Oswaldo Chinchilla, Christopher and Marydee Donnan, Vanessa Fonseca, Hugo García Capistrán, Edward S. Harwood, Hugo Ikehara-Tsukayama, Guilhem Olivier, Daniel Rifkin, Antonio Saborit, Patricia Sarro, Javier Urcid, Adrián Velázquez Castro, Brian Woody, and Eva Zapata Signorino.

Finally, our appreciation goes to the Michel David-Weill Fund and the David L. Klein, Jr. Foundation for supporting the exhibition. The Met's quarterly *Bulletin* program is supported, in part, by the Lila Acheson Wallace Fund for The Metropolitan Museum of Art, established by the cofounder of *Reader's Digest*.

Note to the Reader

Unless otherwise noted, all works illustrated are from the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

This publication is issued in conjunction with the exhibition *Creatures of Myth and Imagination: Europe and the Americas*, on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from May 18 through October 18, 2026.

The exhibition is made possible by the Michel David-Weill Fund.

The Met's quarterly *Bulletin* program is supported, in part, by the Lila Acheson Wallace Fund for The Metropolitan Museum of Art, established by the cofounder of *Reader's Digest*.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, Spring 2026
Volume LXXXIII, Number 4
Copyright © 2026 by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin (ISSN 0026-1521) is published quarterly by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10028-0198. Periodicals postage paid at New York NY and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Membership Department, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10028-0198. Four weeks' notice required for change of address. The *Bulletin* is provided as a benefit to Museum members and is available by subscription. Subscriptions $30.00 a year. Back issues available on microfilm from National Archive Publishing Company, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Volumes I–XXXVII (1905–42) available as a clothbound reprint set or as individual yearly volumes from Ayer Company Publishers, Suite B-213, 400 Bedford Street, Manchester, NH 03101, or from the Metropolitan Museum, 66–26 Metropolitan Avenue, Middle Village, NY 11381-0001.

Published by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Mark Polizzotti, Publisher and Editor in Chief
Peter Antony, Associate Publisher for Production
Michael Sittenfeld, Associate Publisher for Editorial

Editor of the *Bulletin*: Anne Blood Mann
Bibliographic editing by Robyn C. Fohouo
Production by Christina Grillo
Designed by Julia Ma, Miko McGinty Inc.
Image acquisitions and permissions by Shannon Cannizzaro and Jenn Sherman
Typeset in Nautila, Newsreader, and Aktiv Grotesk
Separations by Professional Graphics, Inc., Rockford, Illinois
Printed and bound by GHP Media, Inc., West Haven, Connecticut

MIX
Paper | Supporting responsible forestry
FSC® C016212
FSC
www.fsc.org

Front cover: Ear ornament with winged runners, 400–700, Moche, North Coast, Peru (fig. 25). Page 2: Fragment of a tapestry or wall hanging, 1420–30, Basel, Switzerland (detail of fig. 32). Back cover: Aquamanile in the form of a dragon, ca. 1200, Northern Germany (detail of fig. 36).

Photographs of works in The Met collection are by Bruce Schwarz and Peter Zeray, Imaging Department, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, unless otherwise noted. Additional photography credits: © Archivo Digital MNA. Colección Museo del Templo Mayor. Inah-Canon: fig. 6; Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée nationale (France): fig. 3; photo by Javier Hinojosa: fig. 8a–c; image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art: back cover, p. 2, figs. 1, 2, 5, 7, 9, 10–14, 21–24, 29–32, 34–37, 42, 43, 45; image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photo by Hugo García Capistrán: fig. 49; image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photo by Marydee Donnan: fig. 47; image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photo by Anna-Marie Kellen: front cover, figs. 25, 33; image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photo by Bruce Schwarz: figs. 15–18, 38, 40; image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photo by Peter Zeray: figs. 4, 19, 20a,b, 26–28, 39, 41, 44, 46, 48.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art endeavors to respect copyright in a manner consistent with its nonprofit educational mission. If you believe any material has been included in this publication improperly, please contact the Publications and Editorial Department.

Every effort has been made to track object provenances as thoroughly and accurately as possible based on available scholarship, traceable transactions, and the existing archaeological record. Despite best efforts, there is often an absence of provenance information. Provenances of objects in The Met collection are updated as additional research comes to light. Readers are encouraged to visit metmuseum.org and to search by an object's accession number for its most up-to-date information.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Please note that no part of this publication may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art
1000 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10028
metmuseum.org